

THE EVOLUTION OF SACRED MUSIC AND ITS RITUALS IN WATAUGA COUNTY,  
NORTH CAROLINA: A COMPARISON OF CONGREGATIONAL SONG IN TWO  
INDEPENDENT MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCHES

A Thesis  
by  
MEREDITH ABIGAIL DOSTER

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APPROVED BY:

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James R. Goff  
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

---

Susan E. Keefe  
Member, Thesis Committee

---

Conrad E. Ostwalt  
Member, Thesis Committee

---

Patricia D. Beaver  
Director, Center for Appalachian Studies

---

Edelma D. Huntley  
Dean, Research and Graduate Studies

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## ABSTRACT

### THE EVOLUTION OF SACRED MUSIC AND ITS RITUALS IN WATAUGA COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA: A COMPARISON OF CONGREGATIONAL SONG IN TWO INDEPENDENT MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCHES

Meredith Abigail Doster, B.A., Barnard College

M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: James Goff, Jr.

Shape-note traditions are both a style and practice of rural hymnody that contribute to the varied canon of American folk hymnody. The history of shape-note traditions in the United States highlights the polarity between the early four and seven-shape traditions and the ensuing seven-shape gospel movement, defining the former as traditional and the latter as popular and modern. The designation of gospel music as a popular phenomenon resulted in a variety of responses that shaped the representation of the genre within Appalachia. This thesis is an exploration of seven-shape gospel music and its persistence within rural, independent Baptist churches in Watauga County, North Carolina.

I began exploring seven-shape gospel music under the assumption that I was dealing with an obscure singing tradition unique to a small number of rural churches. Therefore, I focused my attention on Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist Churches, whose singing practices have been and continue to be defined by seven-shape gospel music. In

January 2009, I began observing and researching the singing traditions of these two churches, attending Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening services, having selected these specific congregations for their different interpretations of a shared shape-note heritage. In addition to participant observation, I also conducted interviews with several members of each congregation, focusing in particular on the two choir directors.

Over the course of my research, patterns in worship order and style emerged that indicated an intrinsic connection between the rural, independent Baptist church and the seven-shape gospel tradition. My ongoing interviews corroborated that Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Churches were not sole remnants of a dying, seven-shape gospel tradition, but rather two examples of an enduring regional practice that persists within the independent Baptist churches in the tri-state area of western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, and southwest Virginia. As I delved deeper into the history and roots of seven-shape gospel music in Watauga County, I uncovered an entrenched regional singing tradition characterized by monthly and annual singing conventions, indicating a popularity that confounded my initial perception of the movement as an isolated, rural phenomenon. My case study of two rural churches has therefore necessarily shifted to accommodate the vibrant history of rural hymnody in the United States and its controversial representation and preservation in Appalachia, raising important questions about the limitations of regional scholarship that has heretofore discounted the seven-shape gospel tradition as a trait of indigenous worship.

*For*

*Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist Churches*

*“Let us love our God supremely, let us love each other too”*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Reconsidering the Paradigm of Exceptionalism

Combining an archaic method of notation with a steady stream of annually published materials, seven-shape gospel music exists as a hybrid genre that celebrates both old and new in sacred song. Successor to early shape-note music of the oblong tunebook traditions and precursor to the commercial southern gospel empire, seven-shape gospel plays a transitional role within the evolution of American rural hymnody. As such, its impact is often obscured by both the traditions out of which it emerged and those into which it evolved. Less celebrated than its sister hymn traditions today, seven-shape gospel once dominated rural hymnody, spreading from the nineteenth century urban revival movement to the South. By the turn of the twentieth century, the growing world of gospel music had largely displaced its predecessors, the early four and seven-shape note traditions. Over time, the genre evolved to accommodate an emergent consumer society and seven-shape gospel transformed from a participatory singing tradition into the popular performance-based entity now known as professional southern gospel.<sup>1</sup> This transformation resulted in the simultaneous commercialization and marginalization of the genre, a dichotomy that has obscured the persistence of seven-shape gospel music as a vital component of rural worship today.

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between the seven-shape gospel tradition that persists in rural churches and its commercial counterpart in the southern gospel movement lies in the participatory nature of the former and the performance-based tradition of the latter. As seven-shape gospel music evolved, it moved away from its shape-note roots that tied the tradition to musical education and congregational singing and shifted to accommodate a growing consumer society more interested in listening to gospel music than singing it.

Scholars have identified three main strands of rural hymnody: the lining-out tradition, the early four and seven shape-note traditions, and seven-shape gospel music. While each of these genres originally emerged in the urban North, they persisted most prominently in the rural South, thus earning them their primary designation as rural hymn traditions. The lining-out tradition of the Primitive and Old-Regular Baptists was one of the first forms of sacred music in the early colonies and therefore was considered by some to be the purest form of American folk music. The tradition persisted within *The Sweet Songster* and E.D. Thomas's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, text-only hymnals with selections dating back to the eighteenth century. The foundational role of these hymnals created a tradition comprised of a set repertoire, consisting of songs and texts contained in the two preferred books. Lining-out also functioned as an important precursor to the shape-note traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, shape-note tunebooks replaced text-only hymnals in many communities and significantly shifted the sound and practice of American hymnody. The monophonic hymnody of the lining-out tradition evolved into complex, four-part polyphony, a transition that necessitated the introduction of musical instruction which became a hallmark of shape-note music.<sup>3</sup> Singing schools emerged and singing school teachers educated early American settlers in rudimentary music theory, changing both the substance and quality of congregational song. The theory and practice taught in early singing schools was initially based on the four-shape system and was later replaced by seven-shape

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<sup>2</sup> Beverly Patterson, *The Sound of the Dove: Singing in Appalachian Primitive Baptist Churches* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Monophony is defined as a single, melodic line without harmonization, while polyphony refers to music with at least two melodic lines and implies harmonization.

notation. Over time, the tunebooks of these early shape-note traditions, most prominently *The Sacred Harp* and *The Christian Harmony*, became synonymous with the tradition itself, thereby obscuring the complexities of rural hymnody and its divergent traditions.

The gospel hymn tradition that emerged in the late nineteenth century was published primarily in the seven-shape note system and was therefore frequently referred to as seven-shape gospel music, differentiating it from earlier music written in seven-shape notation. Published in shape-note convention books made popular by publishers like James D. Vaughan and Stamps-Baxter, gospel music was printed in annual or semi-annual convention books that contained the newest gospel music songs. The emphasis on new repertoire provided a stark contrast to earlier forms of rural hymnody that drew from a fixed repertoire published in rarely updated tunebooks. The combination of an old notational style and regularly published songs and books contributed to the complex identity of gospel music as both a traditional and modern genre of music. While the seven-shape gospel tradition is no longer a popular genre of American sacred music, it is far from obsolete. On the contrary, seven-shape gospel music is still the predominant music style within many rural churches in the South. However, since the churches that continue to use shape-note materials are primarily independent and unaffiliated, their history is less well documented and the story of the rural seven-shape singing tradition remains largely untold.

When I initially began this project as part of a course requirement for a research methods class, I understood the seven-shape gospel tradition as both a style and practice of rural hymnody. It was within the context of rural hymn traditions that I began exploring seven-shape gospel music, presuming initially that I was dealing with an obscure singing tradition unique to a small number of rural churches. Therefore, I focused my attention on

Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist Churches, whose singing practices have been and continue to be defined by seven-shape gospel music. In January 2009, I began observing and researching the singing traditions of these two churches, attending Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening services, having selected these specific congregations for their different interpretations of a shared shape-note heritage. In addition to participant observation, I also conducted interviews with several members of each congregation, focusing in particular on the two choir directors.

As I continued my research through the spring, summer, and fall of 2009, my participant observation led me to several other independent churches in the county whose singing practices and traditions were similar, if not identical, to that at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale. I attended a weeklong revival at Green Valley Baptist in the Bethel community, where the order of service resembled those at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale and the *Church Hymnal*, the primary songbook at both sample churches, was also in use. I regularly participated in the monthly Watauga County gospel singing, hosted alternately by either Mountain Dale or Mabel Baptist Churches and observed that it was largely attended by members of the independent Baptist churches in the region. The more time I spent with these independent churches, the more I began to recognize patterns in worship order and style as well as the significant overlap in worship materials, indicating an intrinsic connection between the rural independent Baptist church and the seven-shape gospel tradition. My ongoing interviews corroborated that Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Churches were not the sole remnants of a dying seven-shape gospel tradition, but rather two examples of an enduring regional practice that persists within the independent Baptist

churches in the tri-state area of western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, and southwest Virginia.<sup>4</sup>

As I delved deeper into the history and roots of seven-shape gospel music in Watauga County, I uncovered an entrenched regional singing tradition characterized by monthly and annual singing conventions, indicating a popularity that confounded my initial perception of the movement as an isolated, rural phenomenon. This past February, I sat down with Clint Cornett, choir director at Mountain Dale Baptist, to review a list of churches in Watauga County.<sup>5</sup> Since Cornett taught singing schools in many of the churches in Watauga and neighboring counties, he was intimately familiar with local congregations and thus uniquely suited to categorize churches by their singing traditions. The list was organized by both denomination and location, and as I read the name of each Baptist church, Cornett identified which congregations used seven-shape gospel hymnals and songbooks. Out of a list of seventy-two Baptist congregations, he associated thirty-three with the seven-shape gospel tradition—almost half of the Baptist churches in the county—documenting both a widespread practice and its strong correlation with the independent Baptist movement. While in substantial decline in comparison to the tradition’s heyday of the 1960s and 70s,<sup>6</sup> the enduring popularity of the seven-shape tradition within independent Baptist churches in the county shifted the focus of my research; I was no longer investigating two churches whose

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<sup>4</sup> Seven-shape gospel also persisted in rural areas of Arkansas and Texas, but this study will focus on the singing tradition of independent Baptist churches in western North Carolina.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Susan Keefe and two students, Karen Dunlap and Mark Vickrey, “Watauga County Church List,” W. L. Eury Collection Clippings Files, Belk Library, Appalachian State University, compiled 1984. Search “Religion-Appalachia.”

<sup>6</sup> National participation in seven-shape gospel music declined as early as the 1940s. In Watauga County, however, oral histories of both singers and seven-shape songbook vendors indicate that the tradition peaked as late as the 1960s and early 1970s, after which the practice persisted primarily within rural, independent Baptist churches.

singing tradition rendered them unique and unusual. Rather, the singing tradition itself became the focal point of my study, as its persistence within a large majority of independent Baptist churches in the county indicated something more substantial and pervasive than I had originally envisioned.

My revelation of the seven-shape tradition as a widespread practice was followed by a more puzzling discovery. While academic literature pointed to the emergence and subsequent prevalence of seven-shape gospel music from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, it provided little indication of the genre's persistence and practice at present. This lacuna required further exploration, as the popularity of the tradition seemed disproportionate to its documentation and representation.<sup>7</sup> My research indicated that the relative obscurity of the seven-shape gospel tradition within rural communities was the result of multiple historical phenomena that were recorded and documented across a variety of academic fields and disciplines. As a shape-note tradition, seven-shape gospel music was initially perceived as a popular, modern genre and was not counted among the folk hymn traditions that later received the attention of revivalists and academics, leading to an entrenched misrepresentation of the diversity of rural hymnody. As a singing practice, the commercial identity of seven-shape gospel music that emerged in the mid-twentieth century quickly became representative of the genre as a whole, resulting in the marginalization of its rural church-based equivalent. Finally, as a tradition that persisted prominently in the Appalachian region, seven-shape gospel was further obscured by its popularity within

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<sup>7</sup> While scholars have explored the popular, commercial identity of the seven-shape gospel tradition as an important precursor to the southern gospel tradition, scholarship on the persistence of the rural, church-based practice is still in its infancy. For examples of recent scholarship on the evolution of seven-shape gospel, see James Goff, *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and William Montell, *Singing the Glory Down: Amateur Gospel Music in South Central Kentucky 1900-1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991).



independent Baptist churches of missions-friendly sentiment whose history and contributions have been largely overlooked in favor of older sects.<sup>8</sup> The intersection of these divergent academic lenses demonstrates that seven-shape gospel music remains a widely misunderstood genre of American sacred song.

My case study of Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale ultimately shifted into an exploration of the image and representation of the rural seven-shape gospel tradition. As seven-shape gospel has persisted most prominently among the independent missionary Baptists in Watauga County, my research also delved into documentation of that particular body of churches.<sup>9</sup> Jeff Wilson, raised at Mountain Dale and current member of Mount Lebanon, described the unique relationship between the independent Baptist churches in western North Carolina:

Most of them are just sister churches, that's kind of how we associate with one another, but we're not associated with one another. That's how Paul and the churches of Corinth, Philadelphia and Jerusalem, they helped each other out, but one wasn't over the other, they were separate. Each congregation did exactly what they were led by the Spirit to do, not what the other church was doing.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The churches reviewed for this study are both independent and Baptist with a significant focus on missions. These churches are not, however, aligned with the formal Missionary Baptist denomination, but are rather independent congregations whose commitment to autonomous mission-work resulted in a large-scale exodus out of the Three Forks Baptist Association, the local chapter of the Southern Baptist Convention, in the 1960s and 70s as a result of the association's centralized control of mission funding. While some of these churches are labeled as missionary by name, far more do not use that term, but are rather identified as autonomous, independent Baptist churches with a strong mission focus. The emergence and significance of this particular group of Baptists will be explored in chapter one.

<sup>9</sup> While the term independent might appear incongruous with an association or group of churches, Appalachian religion scholarship and my research have shown that rural, independent Baptist congregations constitute an important movement within the Baptist tradition. However, the use of the term movement does not imply affiliation with a denominational association or convention, but connotes rather an informal group of like-minded churches.

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Wilson, interview with author, digital recording, 06 November 2009, Boone, North Carolina.

To a certain extent, I was reluctant to deviate from my original focus, as the comparison of these two churches provided compelling insight into worship habits commonly associated with Appalachian religion, including communal altar prayers, annual homecoming services, and a congregation comprised of upwards of four generations. However, while a discussion of these unique and unusual worship habits is indeed compelling, it is not the story that needs to be told.

Instead, the more thoughtful conclusion emerging out of my field work and research is the limitation of extant Appalachian religion historiography and its definition of regional religion as both exceptional and unique. A cursory review of Appalachian religion historiography highlights the persistent duality that posits Appalachian or mountain religion in direct comparison with mainstream, conventional practices. This comparative paradigm is a logical extension of the long history of defining the Appalachian region as an “other,” in relation to national norms and perceptions.<sup>11</sup> Scholars Henry Shapiro, Alan Batteau, David Whisnant, and their post-modern colleagues have explored the challenges of exceptionalism, resulting in an enduring academic debate that continues to shape Appalachian historiography.<sup>12</sup> However, that critical self-reflective eye has not yet turned to the study of Appalachian religion and its singing traditions.

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<sup>11</sup> In Henry Shapiro’s seminal study of the region’s complex role within national consciousness, he posits that Appalachia functions as both a “symptom and symbol” of American society and culture. Describing the region as an idea or myth of the American psyche, Shapiro argues that perception has historically superseded regional reality, underlining the symbiotic relationship between Appalachian identity and a national understanding thereof. Henry Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870 – 1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 246.

<sup>12</sup> The disparities between Appalachian counties and their national counterparts are at the root of regional historiography and scholarship that explores if, how, and why Appalachia differs from the American mainstream. Written in the context of divergent yet intersecting models, regional historiography highlights the complex relationship between reality and representation. In the introduction to *Appalachia in the Making*, editors Dwight Billings, Mary Beth Pudur and Altina Waller outline the

Instead, Appalachian religious scholarship relies heavily on the premise that the region and its culture are both unique and exceptional.<sup>13</sup> The apologetic lens of many regional religious historiographers can be viewed as a response to centuries-old depictions of indigenous religion as backward and primitive. Initially, the definition of Appalachian religion in relationship to its mainstream or non-Appalachian counterparts served an important purpose, carving a niche in academia and popular perception for otherwise marginalized and misunderstood traditions. The comparative paradigm required academics and scholars to focus on denominations, sects, and traditions that formed the most conclusive counterpoint to mainstream Protestant denominations and resulted in an emphasis on traditions and practices exclusive to the region. Thus, Appalachian religion was often reduced to its most distinctive worship practices. While celebrating sometimes truly unusual sects, this emphasis ignores other traditional churches of Appalachia whose worship practices are unique, but not anomalous. This partiality has contributed to an enduring fascination with the Old Baptist sects and their singing traditions, thereby obscuring the contributions of more representative communities such as the independent missionary Baptists. Significantly, this group constitutes both the largest traditional religious body in Watauga County and the most active participants of the seven-shape gospel tradition.

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emergence of and competition between various frameworks of Appalachian scholarship and date the origin of these contentious academic debates to the 1960s and 70s. Described as a “torrid debate among Appalachian scholars over what theoretical model best captured Appalachia’s experience,” this dispute has persisted and continues to define scholarship in the region. “Taking Exception with Exceptionalism: The Emergence and Transformation of Historical Studies of Appalachia,” *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Billings, Pudup & Waller (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1-24.

<sup>13</sup>It is important to distinguish between the Appalachian religious landscape and its corresponding scholarship, as personal experience and research has illuminated the sometimes sharp distinction between the two.

Within Watauga County, Appalachian religious identity is largely defined by the composite experience of numerous rural independent Baptist congregations whose singing tradition functions as a fundamental component of worship. Thus, the hypothesis of Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale as unique and exceptional churches proved to be inaccurate. Instead, these two congregations act as representatives of a significant religious movement whose singing tradition should be considered within the scholarship of Appalachian religion. This does not diminish the heritage and contributions of Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale specifically, but rather questions their previous exclusion from the larger body of regional scholarship. As a shape-note tradition, seven-shape gospel persists as both a continuation and a departure from its predecessors, requiring a careful analysis of the evolution of rural hymnody. As an Appalachian phenomenon, the seven-shape gospel tradition remains largely undocumented, as evidenced by a review of the nineteenth century home-missions movement, the mid-twentieth century folk revival, and Appalachian religion historiography. My case study of two rural churches has therefore necessarily shifted to accommodate the vibrant history of rural hymnody in the United States and its controversial representation and preservation in Appalachia, raising important questions about the limitations of regional religion historiography and its role in obscuring the seven-shape gospel tradition as a vital component of Appalachian worship.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Identity and Image of Seven-Shape Gospel Music

When you say shape-note music, people think you're talking about *Sacred Harp*. No, this is not *Sacred Harp* ... It's not professional quartets, dressed alike and traveling around all over the country. It's not this, it's not that. You know, and he had to do all that, he had to peel off all those layers to get down to where, 'This is what it is.'

*Seven-shape publisher Charles Towler, recalling a speech by seven-shape gospel scholar and enthusiast Dr. Stephen Shearon of Middle Tennessee State University*

The seven-shape gospel tradition confounds hymn enthusiasts and scholars alike. Similar in notation to the early four and seven-shape traditions, seven-shape gospel music is often incorrectly associated with well known tunebooks such as *The Sacred Harp* and *The Christian Harmony*, both of which have enjoyed a successful revival within academic and social arenas. The evolution of seven-shape gospel music into the commercial, performance-based identity known as southern gospel, popularized by images of the professional, traveling quartet and the televised Gaither *Homecoming Hour*, often obscured the tradition's rural roots and its persistence in small, independent churches. The history of shape-note traditions in the United States highlights the polarity between the early four and seven-shape traditions and the ensuing seven-shape gospel movement, defining the former as traditional and the latter as popular and modern.

The designation of gospel music as a popular phenomenon resulted in a variety of responses that shaped the representation of the genre within Appalachia. A review of the genre's reception and representation in the region illuminates the paradox of a both popular and peripheral tradition. Nineteenth and twentieth century home missionaries to Appalachia

critiqued the widespread popularity of gospel music, lamenting the displacement of traditional hymnody. Folk revivalists who collected heavily within the Appalachian region during the early to mid-twentieth century undoubtedly encountered a widespread seven-shape gospel singing practice, but neither recorded nor collected gospel music as its popularity eliminated the need for documentation and preservation typically reserved for marginalized and dying traditions. Similarly, Appalachian religion historians largely ignored the tradition, focusing instead on more exceptional characteristics of the region's sects and denominations. The evolution of sacred music in America underscores a sharp divide between rural and urban preferences, old and new traditions, and formal and informal worship styles. These dualities contribute to the enduring confusion surrounding seven-shape gospel music, a rural hymn tradition whose obscurity illuminates the limitations of our perception and understanding of Appalachian religion.

Shape-note traditions are both a style and practice of rural hymnody. While known best as a rural tradition and practice, shape notes are rooted in the nuance of music theory and instruction. The shapes themselves, sometimes referred to as character or patent notes, are visual cues that act as points of reference, creating a unique notational style comprised of geometric figures. The historical trajectory of shape-note singing underscores its origins as a teaching mechanism that became almost instantaneously connected with religious worship and song. This teaching mechanism led to the development of a rich and varied canon of American folk hymnody notated and practiced in shape notes, of which seven-shape gospel music comprises one specific tradition.

Defined by notation printed in either four or seven shapes, shape-note hymnody is perhaps best known for its tunebooks and hymnals. While many consider these tomes

representative of a monolithic, southern shape-note tradition, they actually represent two divergent notation styles, as well as the seven-shape gospel tradition that emerged in the late nineteenth century. All three traditions are characterized by both specific practices and publications that contributed to fierce loyalties among singers. The four-shape tradition established a publishing format that was maintained throughout the initial transition to seven-shape notation, closely linking the two early shape-note styles. The seven-shape gospel tradition, however, significantly altered the publishing paradigm that defined its predecessors, contributing a steady repertoire of new songs that were printed in annually published convention books. Their differences notwithstanding, all shape-note traditions shared a common heritage, as seven-shape gospel publisher Charles Towler noted in a 2009 interview:

But, you can actually trace every single one of the southern gospel music publishing companies back to one source. Seven-note [publishers] can go back and trace their heritage to Ruebush and Kieffer. Well, you see Ruebush and Kieffer, they were grandsons or grandson-in-law to Joseph Funk. And Funk started out in four-note shapes, because that's all anybody knew back then. And of course, they [Ruebush and Kieffer] inherited all that. But anyway, there's that stream, that line that flows from there.<sup>14</sup>

While shape-note traditions flourished in the rural South, the original four-shape system emerged in the urban North in response to the decline of congregational singing during the colonial era. In *History of Church Music in America* published in 1854, Nathaniel D. Gould described the colonial era of religious music in America as “the dark age.”<sup>15</sup> Thomas Walter of Roxbury credited the substandard musicianship in New England to the practice of lining out, in which a leader would read or sing each line of text that the

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Towler, interview with author, digital recording, 19 November 2009, Cleveland, Tennessee.

<sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Gould, *History of Church Music in America* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1853), 58.

congregation would then repeat. This often resulted in musical chaos, sounding like “a disorderly noise” and “five hundred different tunes roared out at the same time.”<sup>16</sup> In response to this burgeoning musical crisis, the colonies looked to the European singing school model, whose “Rules of Gamut: Without the Knowledge of which, it is impossible regularly to perform and Musick”<sup>17</sup> were already improving congregational song. The new method of Regular Singing, also known as Scientific Music, referred to the tradition in which singers learned to read music, signaling a shift away from the oral tradition of lining-out hymnody.



Figure 1. C major scale in four-shape notation. Public domain.

Regular Singing was taught in singing schools that utilized shape-note systems to teach fundamental musicianship skills and congregational singing in New England in the early eighteenth century, and later in the rural South. The earliest singing schools utilized the four-shape notation system invented by Philadelphia shop keeper John Connolly in 1790.<sup>18</sup> Connolly sold his four-shape system to William Smith and William Little, who in 1801

<sup>16</sup> Gould, *History of Church Music*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Stevenson, *Protestant Church Music in America: A Short Survey of Men and Movements from 1564 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 21.

<sup>18</sup> The first shape-note tunebooks were published in four shapes, fa, so, la, and mi. This notation style functioned as the basis for singing schools that provided musical education to early American settlers. While it is not necessary to fully understand the musical implications of the four-shape system, it is important to highlight that its use of only four shapes provided certain theoretical challenges. The major and minor diatonic scales on which western harmony is based consist of seven unique notes, plus an octave. As this first system used only four shapes, some figures were necessarily repeated to complete a full scale, a defining characteristic that was later criticized as both confusing and primitive. Thus, as seen in figure one, a four-shape scale read fa, so, la, fa, so, la, mi, fa.



compiled the first four-shape tunebook, which became a standard teaching tool in early singing schools. *The Easy Instructor: A New Method of Teaching Sacred Harmony* established a format that would be followed in many subsequent shape-note tunebooks. Opening with a section titled “rudiments” that contained the authors’ approach to music theory and instruction, these lessons were based on “an improved Plan, wherein the Naming and Timing of the Notes are familiarized to the weakest Capacity.”<sup>19</sup> The inclusion of teaching tools and theoretical rudiments cemented early on the connection between the shape-note idiom and the field of teaching. It was thus with books such as *The Easy Instructor* that the four-shape tradition took root and eventually spread South, widely disseminating through popular singing schools.

While the four-shape system originated in the urban North, it flourished in the region now known as Appalachia where family-owned publishing houses contributed significantly to the canon of shape-note literature. The Shenandoah Valley, which spans both Pennsylvania and Virginia, was an important region of early shape-note publishing.<sup>20</sup> Joseph Funk, a self-taught musician and composer of German heritage, settled in the Shenandoah Valley in the early nineteenth century and became a lifelong supporter of shape-note notation and music. Funk played an important role in the development of shape-note hymnody, publishing first *Ein allgemein nützliche Choral-Music* in his native German in 1816, but eventually producing *A Compilation of Genuine Church Music* in 1832, a shape-note hymnal with English texts. By 1847, the tunebook was in its fourth printing and had sold widely in

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<sup>19</sup> William Little & William Smith, *The Easy Instructor* (Albany, New York: Websters & Skinners, 1813), Cover.

<sup>20</sup> Harry Eskew, “Shape Note Hymnody in the Shenandoah Valley,” (PhD dissertation, Tulane University, 1966).

Virginia, West Virginia, and neighboring states,<sup>21</sup> indicating the growing popularity of the shape-note system. Funk's practice of compiling and publishing his own tunebooks established a proto-type for the independent, family-owned shape-note publishing company that later became a defining characteristic of the seven-shape gospel tradition. Funk's legacy was perpetuated by his grandson, Aldine S. Kieffer, who later inherited the family publishing business and became editor of the shape-note periodical *The Musical Million*. Funk's publications *Choral Music* (1816), *Genuine Church Music* (1832) and *Harmonia Sacra* (1852) spanned the transition from four to seven-shapes and provided the basis for the Joseph Funk and Sons Publishing Company, a later incarnation of which merged with the Ruebush Publishing Company to form the Ruebush & Kieffer Publishing Company, one of the leading shape-note publishers of the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Between the years 1798 and 1855, over thirty-eight separate volumes of shape-note hymnody were printed and the Funk family's contribution to shape-note publishing was but one example of a prolific and widespread four-shape publishing tradition.

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<sup>21</sup> George Pullen Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*, second edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1965), 26-38. Jackson's seminal 1933 publication provided the first and most thorough synthesis of the various shape-note traditions. Jackson exhaustively researched the genesis and development of both the four and seven-shape systems, the impact of Lowell Mason's Better Music Movement, and the emergence of the seven-shape gospel tradition. In the Foreword, Jackson contextualized his own contribution within the field work and research of late nineteenth and early twentieth century song collectors who frequently overlooked religious material in favor of the more popular ballads and folk songs. Having discovered a relative lacuna, Jackson set out to fully explore the complexities of the "Fasola" and the "Dorayme" contingencies—the four and seven-shape traditions, respectively—and his scholarship continues to provide the most comprehensive analysis of shape-note history in the rural South. However, Jackson's scholarship must be read within the context of his times and their racial paradigm. As an early twentieth century scholar, Jackson chose not to integrate the overlapping histories of the white and African American settler, a decision that has placed his writing at the epicenter of an enduring debate about his racial motivations. While imperfect, few writers since Jackson have attempted to research and synthesize the divergent traditions that emerged and evolved within the shape-note idiom during the latter part of the nineteenth century, and *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* remains an important and influential source on rural hymn traditions.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson, *Spirituals*, 345-349.

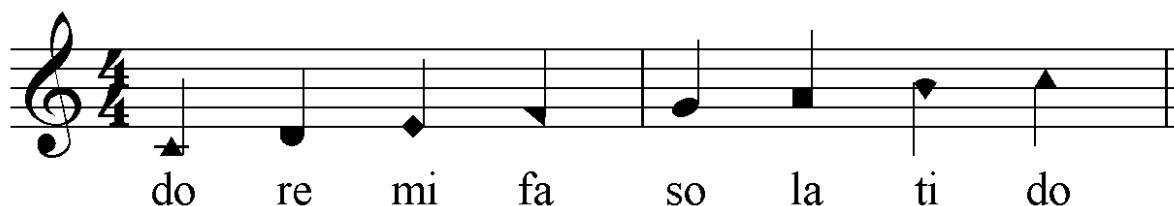


Figure 2. C major scale in seven-shape notation. Public domain.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a new notational device was developed that eventually led to the marginalization of the four-shape tradition. Seven-shape notation added three figures to the original four, providing one unique shape for each note of the scale. Initially, the seven-shape tradition marked a shift in notation only, offering a different and arguably easier premise for music instruction. Although they share a style and name, seven-shape notation is not synonymous with the seven-shape gospel tradition, which emerged in the late nineteenth century. Similar to the original four-shape tradition, seven-shape notation originally emerged in the urban North. Jesse Aiken is widely credited as creator of the seven-shape system, which he debuted in *The Christian Minstrel*, published in 1846 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Initially, this new notational style encouraged widespread innovation, and between the publication of *The Christian Minstrel* and the eventual adoption of Aiken's shape as the definitive seven-shape style in 1876, numerous seven-shape imitations emerged, most notably those of Joseph Funk and William Walker.<sup>23</sup>

Walker functioned as an important figure in the transition between the four and the seven-shape systems. His first four-shape collection, *The Southern Harmony*, appeared in 1835, long before the seven-shape tradition rose to popularity. It was followed by a minor four-shape collection, *Southern and Western Harmonist*, in 1845. However, in 1866, Walker

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<sup>23</sup> Jackson, *Spirituals*, 319-338.

published his third tunebook, *The Christian Harmony*, in the seven-shape tradition and defended this decision in the tunebook's preface, "Seven-Syllable Character-Note Singing, The Quickest and Most Desirable Method Known."<sup>24</sup> Referencing the shift in teaching that this new notation provided, Walker addressed his earlier preference for the four-shape method, but argued that the use of seven names and shapes for each note of the scale was more logical. His infamous question, "Would any parents having seven children ever think of calling them by only four names?"<sup>25</sup> succinctly summarized the theoretical differences between the four and seven-shape notations.<sup>26</sup>

The development of two different notational styles was contentious and resulted in a sharp divide within the shape-note community. While the emergence and eventual dominance of seven-shape notation was hotly contested, the early four and seven-shape traditions were very similar. Their notational style aside, both traditions were published in tunebooks printed in a distinctive, oblong shape with hardback covers, often containing upwards of five hundred hymns. Over time, as these tunebooks gained popularity, the teaching of shape-note music theory became almost secondary to the tunes and songs themselves. In a subsequent printing of *The Sacred Harp*, the editor remarked that "its grand old melodies have been sung over and over so many times by the generations who loved them that the book itself has come to seem almost like a sacred thing."<sup>27</sup> This was true of *The Sacred Harp*, *The Southern Harmony*, and *The Christian Harmony*, all of which were

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<sup>24</sup> Jackson, *Spirituals*, 332.

<sup>25</sup> William Walker, *The Christian Harmony* (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller and William Walker, 1867), iv.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, *Spirituals*, 333.

<sup>27</sup> Gavin Campbell, "Old Can Be Used Instead of New: Shape-Note Singing and the Crisis of Modernity in the New South, 1880-1920," *Journal of American Folklore* 110/436 (Spring 1997): 175.

largely defined by the tunes and texts published in their first edition. Thus, updating and revising early tunebooks was a controversial and contentious process. Revisions of *The Sacred Harp*, for example, were met with repeated critique by singers themselves, who were very resistant to change in either repertoire or notation.<sup>28</sup> Following the Civil War, as the printing of new four-shape tunebooks ceased, the four-shape tradition became largely synonymous with *The Sacred Harp*, which had developed an almost peri-religious stature as the most popular of the early tunebooks.

Despite the popularity of both the four and seven-shape traditions in rural communities in the South, by the mid-nineteenth century urban reformers in the North began revising American folk hymnody, adopting “better” compositional styles from classical European composers during what became known as the Better Music Movement.<sup>29</sup> Under the zealous guidance of its leaders Lowell Mason and Thomas Hastings, the Better Music Movement drastically impacted the shape-note traditions that had flourished until that point, establishing benchmarks for sacred music that favored classical, professional music over homegrown American folk hymnody.

The publication of the *Ohio Sacred Harp* in 1834 revealed the tension between rural American shape-note traditions and the urban aspirations of the Better Music Movement. In 1834, Timothy Mason, Lowell Mason’s brother, transported the ideals of Better Music to the Ohio frontier,<sup>30</sup> home to both fellow Better Music enthusiasts and a widely popular shape-

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<sup>28</sup> Campbell, “Old Instead of New.”

<sup>29</sup> David M. Music, “Tunes by Lowell Mason and Thomas Hastings in Southern United States Shape-Note Tunebooks of the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 26 (2007): 325-352.

<sup>30</sup> In the nineteenth century, the frontier functioned as a magnet for mainstream churches and missionaries who sought to “civilize” the American outback through religious practice. James White

note tradition. While the enduring popularity of the four-shape system forced Mason to publish *The Ohio Sacred Harp* in four shapes, the twenty-page “Introduction to Vocal Music” vehemently opposed the older style of notation:

The most correct method of solemnization is to apply a distinct syllable to each note of the scale, viz.: the syllable DO to one, RE (ray) to two, MI to three, FA to four, SOL to five, LA to six, and SI (see) to seven. Indeed, by pursuing the common method of only four syllables, singers are almost always superficial. It is thereby recommended to all who wish to be thorough, to pursue the system of seven syllables, disregarding the different forms of the notes.<sup>31</sup>

The Mason brothers also published a round-note version of *The Ohio Sacred Harp* and tried to distance themselves from the shape-note edition, insisting that “*The Sacred Harp* is printed in patent notes (contrary to the wishes of the authors) under the belief that it will prove much more acceptable to a majority of singers in the West and South.”<sup>32</sup>

Adding to the contentious confluence of traditions in the late nineteenth century, gospel music began reaching the southern states in the years following the Civil War. In the 1870s and 1880s, new gospel music from the urban centers in the Northeast started to influence shape-note hymn traditions in the South, taking root in small churches.<sup>33</sup> Much of this tradition had emerged in the 1860s for use in America’s growing Sunday School movement and was closely related to the European sounds championed by Lowell Mason. The new genre first appeared in print in Philip P. Bliss’s *Gospel Songs* in 1874 and Bliss and Sankey’s *Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs* in 1875, which sold widely and spread gospel

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identified the “Frontier Tradition” as one of three important additions to western Christianity in the nineteenth century, highlighting the Appalachian mountains and region as both the physical and cultural divide between America and its frontier. James White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 145-146.

<sup>31</sup> Jackson, *Spirituals*, 17-18.

<sup>32</sup> Jackson, *Spirituals*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony*, 6.

music across the nation.<sup>34</sup> Gospel music paralleled the Better Music Movement, emphasizing pleasant, diatonic harmonies and a simple melody line that lent itself well to accompaniment. The gospel song became the popular idiom of this new genre of sacred music, characterized by simple, if rhythmically complex melodies with refrain, by subjective and often personal lyrics, and by largely predictable harmonic progressions:

A harmony consisting of primary triads, secondary dominants (V/V and V/IV are most common) and occasional chromaticism; a melody that frequently moves among different voice parts, often with chromatic inflections; dotted, syncopated rhythms; and repetition of the text.<sup>35</sup>

The introduction of piano accompaniment was a significant departure from earlier, unaccompanied shape-note traditions and contributed to the perception of gospel music as modern and progressive.<sup>36</sup>

A shift in publishing practices also factored into the perception of gospel music as a modern phenomenon. Following the precedent set by Joseph Funk and other independent publishers of the nineteenth century, local family-owned gospel music publishing companies emerged throughout the South. These publishing companies quickly became synonymous with seven-shape gospel music itself, with James D. Vaughan and the Virgil Stamps/Jesse Randall Baxter, Jr. team acting as highly successful, pioneering publishers. By the 1930s, over twenty-nine seven-shape gospel publishing companies were operational in the southern United States. Many maintained strong ties to the communities and churches in which their

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<sup>34</sup> Sales from the first volume of *Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs* amassed \$357,388.64. At a price of thirty cents per volume, over 1,191,293 copies were sold. Campbell, "Old Instead of New," 185.

<sup>35</sup> Donald LeRoy, "The *Church Hymnal*: A Shape-Note Hymnal of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN)" (PhD dissertation, University of Memphis, 2004), 70-71.

<sup>36</sup> Campbell, "Old Instead of New."

representatives held singing schools, using the songbooks specific to their respective publishing companies as teaching tools.<sup>37</sup>

Defined as “a genre that exists outside the formal hymnals published by denominational presses of most Protestant churches,”<sup>38</sup> this new style of music appeared in paperback gospel songbooks frequently referred to as convention books. Published on an annual or semi-annual basis, convention books focused on new songs and repertoire. Described as “taller than wide, thinner, and generally of slightly smaller dimensions than the full-sized hymnals,” these books provided a marked visual difference from the oblong tunebooks of the early four and seven-shape traditions.<sup>39</sup> The non-denominational status of most convention books rendered them popular among many different types of churches, thus increasing their overall visibility, popularity and sales. As new books were published at least annually, gospel music flooded the sacred music market:

Essentially folklike, in that they consisted of easily remembered words with simple melody and harmonization, the hold they took on the public mind was extraordinary ... It has been estimated that more than fifteen-hundred books of this type of song were issued before 1900, with their sales running into fabulous figures, Sankey's books alone selling above fifty million copies ... As a popular musical movement, its like had not occurred before.<sup>40</sup>

As early as 1891, Basil Manly, Jr. described the widespread appeal and dominance of seven-shape convention books that quickly outsold older tunebooks such as *The Sacred Harp* and *The Christian Harmony*:

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<sup>37</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> William Montell, *Singing the Glory Down*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Harry Eskew, David Music, and Paul Richardson, *Singing Baptists: Studies in Baptist Hymnody in America* (Nashville: Church Street Press, 1994), 185.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Guy McCutchan, *Our Hymnody: A Manual of the Methodist Hymnal* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1937), 277-278.



For some years it has been apparent that the rage for novelties in singing, especially in Sunday schools, has been driving out of use the old, precious standard hymns. They are not even contained in the undenominational songbooks which in many churches have usurped the place of our old hymn books.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the early four and seven-shape traditions gave way to the new, “modern” sound and by the late nineteenth century “to sing seven shape was to sing gospel.”<sup>42</sup>

While heralded by some as an indication of progress, many shape-note singers were initially resistant; they considered the new music “downward or backward” and directly opposed the rapid decline of the “good old songs.”<sup>43</sup> The gradual disappearance of the older tunebooks was particularly controversial and the advent of the seven-shape gospel movement was the subject of intense debate, recorded most prominently in *The Musical Million*, a monthly musical periodical published in Singer’s Glen, Virginia, between 1870 and 1914.<sup>44</sup> Proponents of older shape-note traditions lamented the decline in “heartly congregational singing,” placing blame on the “Gospel hymn—so called—a new anthem, or a solo sung by some ‘new light’ who longs to let his light so shine,” and calling for a “revival of the old singing master and old church music.”<sup>45</sup> Almost one century later, Quay Smathers echoed these sentiments in a 1970s Foxfire interview, highlighting an enduring tension between shape-note traditions:

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<sup>41</sup>Eskew, Music, and Richardson, *Singing Baptists*, 190.

<sup>42</sup>Campbell, “Old Instead of New,” 172.

<sup>43</sup> C. H. Cayce, *The Good Old Songs: The Cream of the Old Music*, 34 Ed. (Thornton, Arkansas: Cayce Publishing Company, 1978), Preface.

<sup>44</sup> For a review of the role of *The Musical Million*, see Paul Hall, “*The Musical Million*: A Study and Analysis of the Periodical Promoting Music Reading Through Shape-Notes in North America from 1870-1914” (PhD dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1970), and Gavin Campbell, “Old Instead of New.”

<sup>45</sup> Letter to the Editor, *The Musical Million*, Vol. 120/3 (April 1889): 57.

There's as much difference as day and night between old-time *Christian Harmony* singing and gospel shaped-note singing. *Christian Harmony* singing and gospel singing don't mix—they just don't go together. There isn't any use for a bunch of *Christian Harmony* singers going to a gospel singing and there isn't any use for gospel singers coming to *Christian Harmony*. They just don't go together. They both use shape note but they are sung differently.<sup>46</sup>

While shape-note singers themselves contributed most prominently to the enduring debate about different notation styles and the emergent gospel tradition, within Appalachia the growing popularity of gospel music attracted the attention of home missionaries to the region who vehemently denounced gospel music, using regional surveys and reports to document its persistence in rural churches. By the early twentieth century, Appalachia was a focal point for domestic Protestant mission efforts aimed at ameliorating living conditions and conforming native religious practices to external denominational standards. As historian Loyal Jones noted by century's end, "No group in the country, in my estimation, has aroused more suspicion and alarm among mainstream Christians than have Appalachian Christians, and never have so many Christian missionaries been sent to save so many Christians than is the case in this region."<sup>47</sup>

By combining proselytizing with education, these "home missionar[ies] of culture"<sup>48</sup> founded over one hundred mission schools in the Appalachian region by 1920, many of which challenged and supplanted native cultural and religious practices. The role of outsiders and their religious motivations was thus fundamental to the perception of Appalachian religion, if not to the actual practice thereof, resulting in a sharp distinction

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<sup>46</sup> Carol Rodgers, "Christian Harmony: Quay Smathers," *Foxfire* 7, ed. Paul Gillespie (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 298.

<sup>47</sup> Loyal Jones, *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>48</sup> Emma Bell Miles, *The Spirit of the Mountains* (New York: J. Pott, 1905), xxii.

between the two.<sup>49</sup> In his 1929 publication *Church Life in the Rural South: A Study of the Opportunity of Protestantism Based Upon Data from Seventy Counties*, Edmund Brunner highlighted the distinction between the “reporting” voices of Appalachian churches and the “concluding” or “recommending” views of the investigators, effectively describing external narration that posited native religious experiences as secondary to outsiders’ perceptions thereof:

The facts assembled in this volume were reported by the churches themselves. The conclusions and recommendations that follow are presented, by those responsible for the investigation, for what they are worth and as expressing the views of outsiders.<sup>50</sup>

Twentieth century studies of the region highlighted differences between Appalachian religious practices and mainstream Protestant denominations, focusing on the persistence of small, rural churches in particular.<sup>51</sup> The distinction between native and non-native churches figured prominently into an understanding of rural hymnody, which often functioned as an important and controversial component of indigenous worship. Mission workers who represented mainstream denominations greatly lamented the decline in traditional hymnody as the gospel sound attracted and maintained the attention of large segments of the rural

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<sup>49</sup> This disparity set a precedent for regional religious scholars whose scholarship can, at times, be more representative of an external perception of the region rather than its reality.

<sup>50</sup> Edmund Brunner, *Church Life in the Rural South: A Study of the Opportunity of Protestantism Based Upon Data from Seventy Counties* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), 93.

<sup>51</sup> The following surveys are most relevant to Appalachian religious practices: Edward Brunner’s *Church Life in the Rural South* (1923); Jesse Ormond’s *The Country Church in North Carolina* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1931); the *Appalachian Religion Survey: 1931-1933* (Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College), the results of which were published in Elizabeth Hooker’s *Religion in the Highlands: Native Churches and Missionary Enterprises in the Southern Appalachians* (New York: Home Missions Council, 1933) and in the United States Department of Agriculture’s *Economic and Social Problems and Conditions of the Southern Appalachians* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1935); and *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*, ed. Thomas Ford (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962).

population. In a 1916 report on mission work in the rural South, John Moore responded to the apparent tragedy of the gospel music phenomenon:

The South has suffered greatly in the rural churches and even in the towns and villages by the almost exclusive use of gospel songs ... Thirty to forty years ago only hymns were used, but the Moody and Sankey meetings put the gospel songs into circulation and especially into revival services. They were left for the Sunday-schools and gradually came into use in the public worship. The present mature generation, with their childhood in those early gospel days, has never used extensively the standard hymns and to-day they are almost unable to do so. There is no greater need to-day in the Southern Church life than the development of hymn singing in country and village churches.<sup>52</sup>

In notes on southern mountain religion included in the 1930-1931 Appalachian Religion Survey, field worker Jean Adams also lamented the widespread popularity of the gospel tradition, contrasting the shape-note songs of the “mountain singing masters” with “standard church hymns,” alluding to a hierarchy of sacred singing traditions within which seven-shape gospel music was judged as inferior:

The most popular song books are those published by Vaughan in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. Most of them are in shaped notes, for that is the system of notation known and taught by the mountain singing masters. Practically all the songs are about mother and heaven or meeting mother in heaven. Most of the rest are about the sorrows and trials of this life, or about death and the judgment. The typical mountain congregation knows and uses none of our old standard church hymns to any great extent, except “How Firm a Foundation,” and that is sung to the old Keith tune. Instead of “Jesus Saves” and “O Happy Day” they are more apt to sing such songs as “I Am Bound for the Promised Land,” “The Land Where We’ll Never Grow Old,” “How Beautiful Heaven Will Be,” “Mother’s Got a Home Sweet Home,” “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder,” or “Pisgah” (“When I Can Read My Title Clear”).<sup>53</sup>

In the late 1950s, Protestant missionaries to the Appalachian region were still exploring the persistence of the seven-shape gospel tradition. The 1962 Southern Appalachian Studies

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<sup>52</sup> John Moore, *The South Today* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1916), 188-189. Appalachian Religion Survey Records, 1931-1933, Southern Appalachian Archives at Berea College, Kentucky.

<sup>53</sup> Jean Adams, “Notes Southern Mountains, General,” Appalachian Religion Survey.

Survey<sup>54</sup> included very specific questions about singing preferences, including the following statement, which survey respondents were asked to rate on a scale of one to five: “I like to sing the old gospel songs, rather than the new hymns.” While the survey did not define gospel song or hymns, singing traditions continued to function as an important distinction between indigenous worship practices and their mainstream counterparts. Thus, in the eyes of the home missionaries, the popular and widespread seven-shape gospel movement functioned as both a symptom and a symbol of Appalachian religion, a modern blight on traditional hymnody.

Popularity also figured prominently into the discourse of mid-twentieth century folk revivalists whose definitions of “traditional” excluded gospel music. In the 1940s and 50s, folk music revivalists discovered and collected heavily within Appalachia, recording and preserving marginalized traditions. In his introduction to *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, editor Neil Rosenberg examined the history of the folk revival phenomenon, tracing it to its roots in the minstrelsy and mimicry of the 1830s through the urban folk song revival of the 1960s and 1970s. Rosenberg described the requirements for folk material: “Folksongs had to be old, anonymous, and exist in variant forms; they had to emanate from unlettered rural folk of modest means ... oral tradition, then, was folk tradition.”<sup>55</sup> This definition alone disqualified the seven-shape gospel tradition from the folk revival. As a written tradition based in annually printed tunebooks that emphasized new

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<sup>54</sup>The Southern Appalachian Studies Survey data was published in 1962, but fieldwork was completed during the summer of 1959.

<sup>55</sup> Neil Rosenberg, *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 11.

materials, popular seven-shape gospel music did not fit the folk music paradigm of the 1950s and was therefore of little interest to folk revivalists.<sup>56</sup>

While seven-shape gospel music was overlooked, revivalists and collectors did “discover” other rural sacred music traditions, making numerous field recordings and transporting rural southern traditions to northern academic campuses where they were transformed into social and recreational activities.<sup>57</sup> As such, the marginalized early four and seven-shape traditions that had recently been eclipsed by the seven-shape gospel tradition dovetailed with the folk revival movement, and they entered into the overlapping spheres of revivalism and academia. Charles Towler described the academic revival of the four-shape tradition:

And they [the early four and seven-shape traditions] mainly accomplished it by becoming academic with it. They got on the campuses of colleges and universities and that’s why they have been as successful as they have been.<sup>58</sup>

The role and impact of the folk revival has been exhaustively explored elsewhere,<sup>59</sup> but significant here is its inherent bias against popular, commercial forms of music, a category into which seven-shape gospel fell. Thus seven-shape gospel music, widely popular in rural

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<sup>56</sup> Stephen Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 296-320.

<sup>57</sup> Marini, *Sacred Song in America*, 83. Arguably, Jackson’s scholarship on shape-note singing traditions (*White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*) contributed to a growing academic awareness and interest in rural southern hymnody that emerged during the height of the folk revival. The convergence of academics and folk revivalists resulted in documentation of marginalized traditions that were studied and preserved in revival traditions.

<sup>58</sup> Towler, interview with author.

<sup>59</sup> For more information about the impact of the folk music revival on sacred song traditions, see John Bealle, *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), Stephen Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Popular Culture*, Kiri Miller, *Travelling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008) and Neil Rosenberg, ed. *Transforming Tradition*.

communities at the height of the folk revival, did not meet the standards for preservation and was largely overlooked, resulting in a sharp imbalance in documentation of what arguably emerged as the most popular of the rural hymn traditions.

The omission of the seven-shape gospel tradition from the folk revival movement was prescient of its general exclusion from Appalachian religion historiography, which has historically operated in a comparative paradigm that formulates Appalachian identity, in this case religious identity, in relationship to mainstream national experience. As a distinct region, Appalachia has long been defined by an indigenous culture frequently correlated with a potent religious tradition. Considering it integral to an understanding of regional culture, Loyal Jones coined religion a distinct Appalachian value in 1975 and declared that “mountain people are religious.”<sup>60</sup> Other scholars have contributed to the understanding of Appalachian culture and religion, notably anthropologist Susan Keefe, who described religion as “pervasive in mountain life” and an expression of important and relevant cultural themes.<sup>61</sup> As a religious landscape, Appalachia has been studied and examined through a variety of academic lenses, creating a field of scholarship that both illuminates and obscures the diversity it seeks to explore, posing challenging questions about the intersection of Appalachian religious culture, its academic representation, and the distinction between the two.

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<sup>60</sup> Loyal Jones, “Appalachian Values,” *Voices from the Hills: Selected Readings of Southern Appalachia*, second edition, eds. Robert Higgs and Ambrose Manning (New York: Ungar Publishing Company, 1975), 508.

<sup>61</sup> Susan E. Keefe, “Appalachian Americans: The Formation of a ‘Reluctant’ Ethnic,” *Many Americas: Critical Perspectives on Race, Racism, and Ethnicity*, ed. Gregory Campbell (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1998), 129-154.

Many themes have emerged within the canon of Appalachian religious scholarship, which primarily explores the region's worship traditions in comparison to those of its national counterparts. This academic lens is based on a theoretical paradigm in which Appalachia is understood as a constant or fixed unit that exists in contrast to the national mainstream. Deborah McCauley's *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* and Loyal Jones's *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* provide a general overview of religious experiences and traditions within the region as a whole and function therefore as de facto textbooks on Appalachian religion. The academic lens and perspective presented in these two books is therefore foundational to the field of Appalachian religious studies and critical to our understanding of traditional regional religion. Jones and McCauley both distinguish between "mountain" and "mainline" churches, defining regional religious identity by its distinction from mainstream denominations and practices. McCauley identifies Appalachian religion by the sects and traditions *exclusive* to the region:

Appalachian mountain religion is one of the very few uniquely American regional religious traditions to which Protestantism in the United States can lay claim. It is made up of church traditions found almost entirely in the region's mountains and small valleys. Generally, they do not exist beyond Appalachia, except through out-migration. These church traditions, nearly invisible to the outside world and to much of the Protestant mainstream even within Appalachia, make up what is exclusive to religious life in Appalachia.<sup>62</sup>

Jones also defines mountain religion in comparison to its mainstream counterpart, which he locates within "urban churches of the best-known denominations of Protestantism,"<sup>63</sup> implicitly characterizing Appalachian religion as a rural phenomenon found in obscure and rare sects. While McCauley writes a largely chronological account and Jones organizes his

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<sup>62</sup> Deborah McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>63</sup> Jones, *Faith and Meaning*, 9.



writing thematically, both authors identify specific traits and ideas as distinctly “Appalachian” or “mountain,” limiting the definition of traditional regional religion to sects and worship traditions that provide a strong counterpoint to their mainstream equivalents.

Calvinism, and its distinction from Arminian theology, is a recurring duality within regional scholarship.<sup>64</sup> Calvinist theology, or a remnant thereof, has long been considered the foundation of a traditional Appalachian or mountain church. The namesake of Swiss theologian John Calvin, Calvinism is based on the austere premise of an unconditional but limited election, understood as an act of grace by a sovereign God. Within Appalachia, this theology has persisted most prominently within the “Old-Baptist” sects, of which the Primitive and Old Regulars are perhaps best known. Conversely, mainstream denominations are purportedly characterized by the Dutch teachings of Jacob Arminius, a second generation Calvinist who refined unconditional election to include the choice and free will of the believer. Associated with evangelism and revivalism, Arminian theology is described as a modern phenomenon and a defining characteristic of non-mountain religion and churches.<sup>65</sup>

Critical to the duality of Calvinist/Arminian theology is its correlation with anti-mission and missions-friendly sentiment. Given Calvinism’s emphasis on a limited election, evangelizing and mission work serve little purpose, as neither have the potential to impact God’s sovereign pre-determination. Thus, as an extension of the competing ideological frameworks of Calvinism and Arminianism, sects’ attitudes towards mission work also function as a designator of mountain religion within regional scholarship. McCauley dated

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<sup>64</sup> Other important characteristics of mountain religion explored by both Jones and McCauley include pietism, the widespread use of laypersons in worship, a preference of called clergy, and a strong oral tradition, as well as a pronounced polarized or dualistic understanding of the world and the afterlife.

<sup>65</sup> McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion*, 15-16, and Jones, *Faith and Meaning*, 13-50, 206-207.

the schism between indigenous Appalachian religion and the Protestant mainstream to the 1820s, defining Appalachian religion by its anti-mission sentiment and mainstream churches by missionary activity.<sup>66</sup> Missions-friendly denominations that emerged in response to anti-missions sentiment therefore became associated with the “modern” Protestant mainstream, while the anti-missionary Primitive and Old Regular Baptists became the prototype of indigenous, native worship.

The decision to define mountain religion by its Calvinist, anti-missionary theology has had broad implications for our understanding of Appalachian religious culture, including its singing traditions. By predominantly equating mountain religion with a Calvinist, anti-missionary theology, Appalachian religion historiography has largely discounted sects and traditions that emerged out of the contentious missions/anti-missions split. This omission is most pronounced in regards to the widespread missionary Baptists whose name derived from their opposition to anti-mission sentiment and whose singing practices constitute a significant remnant of the seven-shape gospel tradition. Mount Lebanon church member Jeff Wilson described the local definition of independent Baptist congregations, linking their identity to missionary activity:

That local church has control over how it evolves and worships and how it participates in the universal church. And it's not this other church's business to tell them how to do it, if that's how they feel led to actually do it, that's how they should do it—that's why they're an independent church. That's the distinction. The independent has no authority from anybody else. They have their own authority over their own congregation, that's it. They're not told, by any other association or any other bishop or preacher, or anything, how to do things, or what they need to be doing. That's one reason why a lot of the independents will only support specific missionaries instead of just sending their money to a specific missionary board, because that board will decide who it goes to.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion*, 36.

<sup>67</sup> Jeff Wilson, interview with author.

Regional historian and religion enthusiast Howard Dorgan described the beginning of the missionary Baptist movement, highlighting its origin within the missions/anti-missions divide:

By the 1820s, Appalachian Baptist fellowships had become increasing[ly] sensitive about any question relating to missionary work, with the results that many of these congregations began to split toward either the anti-missionary side or the missionary side. When these churches ultimately split one side inevitably became known as a “missionary Baptist” fellowship, using a lowercase “m.” Thus the Missionary Baptist subdenomination had its beginning, quickly forging its own larger network of associations that linked the churches of like-thinking.<sup>68</sup>

The definition of missionary Baptists as “modern” and part of the Protestant mainstream is problematic in some regions, including Watauga County, North Carolina, where the “modern” missions-friendly or missions-neutral theology significantly predated anti-mission sentiment. Long before the establishment of an anti-mission body in the region that was to become Watauga County, two missions-friendly religious bodies existed: the Yadkin Association, constituted in 1786, and the Mountain Association, which split from the Yadkin in 1799. In his 1964 Master’s thesis written and defended at Appalachian State University, “A Baptist People and the Events Leading to the Formation of the Three Forks Association,” Larry Penley described the missionary influence in the region as “great.”<sup>69</sup> When the Mountain Association initially split from the Yadkin, it was in an effort to create two smaller and more manageable regional bodies, both of which remained missions-friendly for the next forty years.<sup>70</sup> While an anti-mission faction emerged in the Mountain

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<sup>68</sup> Howard Dorgan, “Appalachian Religion: Its Novelty, Spirit, and Diversity: The Beginnings of the Primitive and Missionary Baptists,” *Watauga Democrat*, 30 January 2004.

<sup>69</sup> Larry Howard Penley “A Baptist People and the Events Leading to the Formation of the Three Forks Association” (Master’s thesis, Appalachian State University, 1964), v.

<sup>70</sup> Maloy Huggins, *A History of North Carolina Baptists, 1727-1932* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Edwards and Broughton, 1967), 137-139, 154-157.

Association in the 1840s, it did not gain a stronghold in the Watauga County area, but found much stronger support in neighboring Ashe and Avery Counties, where Old Regular and Primitive Baptist Churches persist to this day. In Watauga County, however, as the Mountain Association declared itself an anti-mission body, a large majority of churches joined with the emergent, missions-friendly Three Forks Association in 1841. Thus, a more accurate representation of mountain religion in Watauga County would necessarily include the widespread and popular independent Baptist churches, whose mission-friendly congregations have long represented the religious majority.

The examination of Calvinism as a designator of Appalachian religion, as presented in regional religious scholarship, highlights the complexity of the diverse traditions within the region. Some of this diversity has been obscured by an enduring fascination with “Old Baptist” sects whose unique worship habits have become representative of regional religious identity, thereby reducing Appalachian religion to its most visibly distinctive worship practices, such as river baptisms, foot washing ceremonies, and homecoming/decoration day celebrations. In his extensive 1985 bibliography, “Religion in Appalachia and the Rural South,” Charles Lippy acknowledged the emphasis on visible practices, such as snake handling<sup>71</sup> and foot washing.<sup>72</sup> Many independent missionary Baptist churches no longer practice these worship traditions and are therefore frequently correlated with the modern Protestant mainstream. Even so, they have not yet been explored as part of traditional Appalachian religious heritage. In this instance, the foundational role of Calvinist theology

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<sup>71</sup> While snake handling is widely associated with the Pentecostal tradition and has little correlation with the independent Baptists, its widespread documentation has resulted in an enduring fascination with this marginalized practice.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Lippy, “Religion in Appalachia and the Rural South,” *Bibliography of Religion in the South* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer, 1985), 299-314.

and its corresponding anti-mission sentiment directly impacts our understanding of seven-shape gospel, a tradition that persists most prominently within the independent missionary Baptist churches that have thus far been excluded from regional religious scholarship.

The seven-shape gospel tradition exists at the crossroads of multiple academic fields and inquiries. A linear review of shape-note history highlights that seven-shape gospel music emerged as a popular, modern phenomenon that contributed to the marginalization of its predecessors, the four and seven-shape traditions printed in oblong tunebooks. In turn, this marginalization attracted the attention of collectors who initiated the revival of the lining-out and early shape-note traditions, which became increasingly popular in the academic arena, thereby obscuring the persistence of the most popular of rural hymn traditions, seven-shape gospel music. Within Appalachia, this popularity elicited different responses from those documenting religious activity in the region. Nineteenth century home missionaries were opposed to the widespread use of the gospel song, which they viewed as a threat to traditional hymnody. The response of contemporary historians has been similar to that of the mid-twentieth century folk revivalists, and as a result the widespread nature of seven-shape gospel music has been excluded from descriptions and definitions of traditional Appalachian religion. Nonetheless, the seven-shape gospel tradition persists as a vital but invisible component of Appalachian religion.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Sacred Singing Traditions in Watauga County, North Carolina**

Even in the thirty or so years of study that I have put into examining Appalachian religious traditions, I have found Watauga County to be less and less of a treasure chest of bygone traditions.

*Howard Dorgan, "Appalachian Religion: Its Novelty, Spirit, and Diversity," Watauga Democrat, 27 February 2004.*

Watauga County has a long history of sacred singing rooted in various shape-note traditions. Located in rural western North Carolina, Watauga is home to a county singing convention that was recorded as early as the turn of the twentieth century, but which likely predated written documentation. In addition to an active singing convention, Watauga County is home to a substantial number of independent Baptist churches, most of which continue to use seven-shape gospel materials in their worship services. Many churches in the county continue to use seven-shape materials, but far fewer have continued the practice of teaching the shape-note tradition, resulting in distinctions between otherwise remarkably similar sister churches. The well-documented history of the seven-shape gospel tradition in regional newspapers and surveys stands in stark contrast to academic scholarship on the region's religious tradition and sheds light on this popular singing tradition that persists as a vital component of rural worship in Watauga County today.

#### *Watauga County: A Scholar's Perspective*

A review of singing traditions in Watauga County illuminates the distinction between religious scholarship and regional experience. Retired Appalachian State University

professor and regional religion scholar Howard Dorgan spent over thirty years researching Baptist sects in the tri-state area of western North Carolina, east Tennessee, and southwest Virginia, documenting traditional worship practices. Dorgan synthesized his extensive research in a 2004 series in the *Watauga Democrat*, “Appalachian Religion: Its Novelty, Spirit, and Diversity,” in which he described Appalachia as “one of the most religiously diverse areas of the nation,” and highlighted the multiplicity of religious practices that exist in the region. He also emphasized the unique nature of Appalachian religion, describing a “rich variety of Protestant subdenominations not found elsewhere [with] colorful collections of worship traditions, again seldom seen in other regions of the country.”<sup>73</sup> While Dorgan praised the abundance of religious traditions in the region, he focused primarily on unique and unusual communities and worship habits, concentrating primarily on the old-time Baptist denominations. Over the course of the series, Dorgan devoted eleven out of twelve articles on Appalachian Baptist sects to the Old Regulars and Primitives.<sup>74</sup>

In his 1987 study of Baptist sects in Appalachia, *Giving Glory to God: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations*, however, Dorgan had characterized the tri-state region as “heavily Baptist, with the strongest tradition—at least among the small mountain churches—being missionary Baptist.”<sup>75</sup> He defined these churches as a “small independent fellowship—independent at least in the sense that it is not affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. It believes in an evangelistic mission, and in the past probably separated from a

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<sup>73</sup> Dorgan, “Appalachian Religion,” 09 January 2004.

<sup>74</sup> Dorgan, “Appalachian Religion,” 09 January 2004.

<sup>75</sup> Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God*, xvi.

more Calvinist anti-mission association.”<sup>76</sup> Despite their prevalence, Dorgan’s study examined missionary Baptists the least, underscoring the curious inverse relationship between the region’s most popular religious tradition and its representation in scholarship. Dorgan was certainly not alone in his focus; in describing the missionary Baptists, he acknowledged a pervasive lack of scholarly inquiry:

Frank S. Mead’s *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* lists twenty-seven subdenominations of Baptists; *The Protestant Churches of America*, by John A. Hardon, mentions twenty-three distinct Baptist groups; and Elmer T. Clark’s *Small Sects in America* briefly discusses sixteen of the lesser-known Baptist divisions. But none of these volumes acknowledges the existence of a faction known as Missionary Baptists. Nevertheless, in the mountains of North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia—and elsewhere—there are multitudes of small independent Baptist fellowships that identify themselves by this term.<sup>77</sup>

In Dorgan’s schematic diagram of Baptist denominations in Appalachia, the missionaries occupy a liminal position—too modern for the old-time Baptists, but too traditional for the mainstream denominations that continue to function as an important benchmark for non-Appalachian religion. Within his examination of rural Baptist traditions, a focus on unique and anomalous practices led Dorgan to summarize his experiences studying religion in Watauga County, North Carolina, as follows: “Even in the thirty or so years of study that I have put into examining Appalachian religious traditions, I have found Watauga County to be less and less of a treasure chest of bygone traditions.”<sup>78</sup> Dorgan discredited religious tradition within Watauga County due to the dearth of “Old-Time”

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<sup>76</sup> Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God*, 41.

<sup>77</sup> Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God*, 41.

<sup>78</sup> Dorgan, “Appalachian Religion,” 27 February 2004.



Baptist sects and their specific worship practices, encouraging readers to seek out “original cultures”<sup>79</sup> in neighboring counties instead.

Nonetheless, the independent missionary Baptists of the tri-state area have long contributed significantly to regional religious identity and seven-shape gospel music functions as an import characteristic of the native traditions that Dorgan sought, but did not always find. The evolution of singing traditions in Watauga County highlights the intersection of the independent Baptists and seven-shape gospel, as well as the prominent role that gospel music and its conventions played in the region from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century before the tradition receded largely unnoticed into rural churches.

*Watauga County: A Historical Perspective*

In 1990, Three Forks Baptist Church in Watauga County, North Carolina, celebrated its bicentennial anniversary with a review of two hundred years of sacred music. On Sunday, October 14, 1990, interim choir director and Appalachian State University professor of music Dr. Charles Isley led a special service, showcasing the rural hymn traditions that characterized congregational and choral singing throughout the church’s history. The program started with nineteenth century a capella hymns, including the lining-out tradition that survived in Primitive and Old Regular Baptist churches in neighboring counties, but which had disappeared from most Watauga County churches by the late nineteenth century. Next, Isley included selections from both *The Southern* and *The Christian Harmony*, oblong tunebooks that once dominated both sacred and social singing traditions, and which fell out of popular use by the early twentieth century in Watauga County. The musical journey

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<sup>79</sup> Dorgan, “Appalachian Religion,” 27 February 2004.

concluded with songs from both paperback convention books and hardcover denominational hymnals that were printed in the seven-shape gospel style. While all three rural hymn traditions contributed historically to sacred music in Watauga County, only seven-shape gospel music has persisted as an active tradition, surviving in rural independent missionary Baptist churches.<sup>80</sup>

The stronghold of Baptist churches in the region dates to the constitution of the first church in what eventually became Watauga County. Three Forks Baptist Church was founded on November 6, 1790, out of the Yadkin Baptist Association and was recorded as the first church in the region. The only church in the region for almost forty years,<sup>81</sup> Three Forks quickly became a leading force in the community, eventually becoming the bedrock of the Three Forks Association, one of the oldest Baptist associations in the state. Many churches originated out of Three Forks Baptist, which functioned as a mother church for many early congregations in the region.<sup>82</sup> In a history of neighboring Ashe County, North

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<sup>80</sup> Other rural hymn traditions, such as the lining out tradition prevalent among Primitive Baptist and Old Regular Baptist congregations, as well as the early four and seven-shape note traditions, persist in other regions, including neighboring counties, but are significantly less pronounced in Watauga County than the seven-shape gospel tradition.

<sup>81</sup> Sources differ on the role of Methodism during the settlement of the Watauga County region. While Henson's Chapel Methodist Church, the first Methodist church in the area, was not constituted until 1858, Bishop Francis Asbury recorded a journey through the western North Carolina mountains in the late eighteenth century. Betsy Graham Covington, "Methodism Comes to the Mountains," *The Heritage of Watauga County, North Carolina, Volume I* (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: The History Division of Hunter Publishing Company, 1984), 6-7.

<sup>82</sup> The lineage of many present-day churches in Watauga County can be traced to Three Forks Baptist or other early religious bodies in the region. Cove Creek Baptist Church, for example, was constituted out of Three Forks Baptist in 1799. In turn, Cove Creek eventually oversaw the constitution of Bethel Baptist in 1851, which subsequently supported the constitution of Mountain Dale Baptist in 1941. Brushy Fork Baptist, founded in 1858, was instrumental in the founding of Mount Lebanon Baptist Church in 1881. Ben Horton, "The First Churches," *Glimpses of Yesteryear in Watauga County* (Boone, North Carolina: B. Horton, 1975), 3, and *The Heritage of Watauga County, North Carolina, Volume I*, 7-9.

Carolina, J. F. Fletcher described the important role of early mountain churches and associations:

It may be seen that our State, Home and Foreign Mission Boards of today and our whole financial system are simply an enlargement of the missionary plans of the Yadkin Baptist Association, laid in 1790, involving more men, more money and a larger territory. These splendid Baptists, with their eyes set on the future, builded better than they knew ... From this beginning, so filled with the missionary spirit, the Baptists began to spread abroad and to multiply and there has been no let-up through the years ... Every one of these old churches became a center of missionary effort. Located at strategic points, they began to reach out into the county surrounding them, bringing into their membership the leading men and women of the time and from every one of these churches, two and three and even more churches grew and were set apart for the service of God. At this time, between 1790 and 1799, no other denomination was represented in all this vast territory by an organized church, association, conference or presbytery, and few of them had any preacher in the territory.<sup>83</sup>

In the article “Baptist Circuit Riders Win Confidence of People” in the 1975 Bicentennial Edition of the *Watauga Democrat*, the dominance of the Baptist tradition was attributed to circuit-rider preachers who spread Baptist faith and doctrine throughout western North Carolina in the early nineteenth century.<sup>84</sup> Oral histories collected in Watauga County also stressed the role of the early Baptist missionary<sup>85</sup> in the region. In a 1999 interview, Mrs. Genevieve Sherwood Henson described her life in the Bethel community as the great-great granddaughter of Baptist missionary and preacher William Farthing: “My great-great grandfather, William Farthing, was the first Farthing to come to this area. He was a Baptist

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<sup>83</sup> J. F. Fletcher, *A History of Ashe County, North Carolina, and New River, Virginia, Baptist Associations* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Commercial Printing Company, 1935), 15.

<sup>84</sup> “Baptist Circuit Riders Win Confidence of People,” *Watauga County Democrat Bicentennial Edition*, 1 July 1975.

<sup>85</sup> Early missionaries and religious figures within the Appalachian region were part of the settlement process and contributed to the establishment of indigenous mountain religion. It is crucial to distinguish between native missionaries and nineteenth century “home-missionaries,” who represented mainstream denominations and sought to transform Appalachian religious practices. McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion*, 340-343.

preacher and he came as a missionary to the people who lived in this area ... Many Baptist preachers descended from him.”<sup>86</sup>

These early missionaries and churches established an enduring Baptist tradition in the region that persists to the present day. In a 1949 survey of churches in Watauga County, six denominations were represented, with the Baptists greatly outnumbering all of the other denominations combined.<sup>87</sup> In a 1975 thesis on the material culture of churches in Watauga County, Theodore Albrecht examined seventy-seven churches. Of those, forty-five were Baptist, with an additional five labeled as Missionary Baptist; together, the Baptist churches equaled 64 percent of Albrecht’s sample.<sup>88</sup> In 1984, Dr. Susan E. Keefe of Appalachian State University compiled a list of churches in the county with the help of two students, locating 125 congregations. Of those, sixty-six were Baptist—almost 53 percent of the church population in Watauga County.<sup>89</sup> While the overall percentage of Baptist churches declined between 1975 and 1984 as other denominations made inroads into the region, Baptists continue to dominate in number, with a substantial community of independent Baptist churches active to date.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Genevieve Sherwood Henson, “Growing up in Bethel,” *Community and Change in the North Carolina Mountains: Oral Histories and Profiles from Western Watauga County*, eds. Nannie Greene and Catherine Stokes Sheppard (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2006), 14.

<sup>87</sup> D. J. Whitener, *History of Watauga County, A Souvenir of Watauga Centennial, Boone, North Carolina* (Boone, North Carolina: Published by author, 1949), 61-62.

<sup>88</sup> Theodore Albrecht, “Religious Material Culture in Watauga County, North Carolina: A Survey of Its Rural Churches and Cemeteries,” (Master’s thesis, Appalachian State University, 1975), 2.

<sup>89</sup> Keefe, “Watauga County Church List.”

<sup>90</sup> In “Baptists in Watauga County,” *The Heritage of Watauga County, North Carolina, Volume I*, 8-9, Earl Greene defines the independent Baptist churches within Watauga County as missionary Baptist congregations “bound with common ties,” including the practice of complete immersion and the observance of the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper.

The emphasis on the Baptist tradition is crucial to this study as scholars have noted the correlation between independent Baptists, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches and the seven-shape gospel movement, identifying these religious groups as active participants in rural song traditions.<sup>91</sup> Within western North Carolina, the correlation between Baptists and singing was documented in the 1931 Appalachian Religion Survey that reviewed churches and worship practices in Avery County. One student wrote, “The folks who do most of the singing in the church are two or three Baptist members,” and another commented that “the Baptists have fairly good singing at their service.”<sup>92</sup> In this same survey, the predominance of Baptist churches led surveyors to title a section of their report “Why are there so many Baptists?”<sup>93</sup> This dominance can largely be attributed to the first church in the region, Three Forks Baptist, whose missionary impulses resulted in an active and widespread Baptist tradition whose singing practices became synonymous with seven-shape gospel music by the turn of the twentieth century.

### *The Evolution of Singing Traditions in Watauga County*

The bicentennial celebration of Three Forks Baptist Church highlighted the evolution of sacred music within Watauga County. In addition to the music program, Three Forks Baptist also celebrated its anniversary with an outdoor service held at the original site of the church. The pastor at the time, Dr. Robert Odom, reported in the local *Watauga Democrat*, “There they will pitch a large tent and hold a service that will be as closely patterned after the old-fashioned worship service as possible.” This old-fashioned service was in part defined

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<sup>91</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony*, 5-6, and LeRoy, “The Church Hymnal,” 49-50.

<sup>92</sup> “Student Papers, Avery County,” Appalachian Religion Survey.

<sup>93</sup> “Notes, Avery County,” Appalachian Religion Survey.

by the choice of music, described as follows: “There will be singing in the old style (only four notes, no musical accompaniment and no written music).”<sup>94</sup> The definition of old-fashioned shifted with the evolution of rural hymn traditions in Watauga County, as each new phase of rural hymnody eventually displaced or replaced older styles, becoming the “new” old-fashioned. A review of the *Watauga Democrat* and two regional surveys on Appalachian religion documents the transition between rural hymn traditions in the county, highlighting both the dominance of the seven-shape gospel tradition in rural independent Baptist churches throughout the twentieth century and its subsequent decline into relative obscurity, even as it persisted as a prominent rural practice.<sup>95</sup>

The transition between shape-note traditions played out publicly at local singing conventions. Evidence suggests that the evolution of rural hymn traditions was a natural progression readily accepted by local singers, many of whom were active members of rural independent Baptist churches that today constitute the remnant of the seven-shape gospel singing community. A 1905 advertisement in the *Watauga Democrat* indicated a confluence of traditions, announcing a “public singing in Boone” as both an “old and new time singing,” encouraging participants to bring all of their books “from the Fa, La, Me, Sols to the present.” This early twentieth century article highlighted the co-existence of two different traditions, defining one as old and notated in the Fa, La, Me, Sol—or four—shapes and one as new, notated in the “present” style, the seven-shape gospel tradition. While four-shape

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<sup>94</sup> Mike Hannah, “Three Forks Celebrates Anniversary,” *Watauga Democrat*, 15 August 1990.

<sup>95</sup> The 1931-1933 Appalachian Religion Survey Records and the 1956-1959 Southern Appalachian Studies Survey documented regional worship and singing traditions in western North Carolina. The original data for both surveys is located in the Southern Appalachian Archives at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. For the purposes of this project, the author reviewed these surveys as well as one full year per decade of the *Watauga Democrat*, beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, exploring trends and traditions through the frequent announcements and descriptions of singing conventions.

music was presented as old, it was nonetheless described as an active, participatory tradition,<sup>96</sup> with the article calling for singers to bring their own books and to come out and sing for the “cause of vocal music.”<sup>97</sup>

By the 1930s, the early four and seven-shape traditions had declined sufficiently as popular practices to warrant their performance and preservation, as documented in a 1931 article titled “Old Time Choir Sings at Boone Advent Church.” This singing was described as a special music offering following the preaching service at the Boone Advent Church. An emphasis on the increased attendance based on this particular component of the service demonstrated an enduring interest in the older tradition, even as participation declined: “Rather more people than usual [were] present on account of the old-time *Christian Harmony* hymns which were rendered by a group of the older residents of the county.”

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<sup>96</sup> The distinction between participation and performance is critical to an understanding of sacred music traditions. In this study, participatory singing is defined as a congregational or group activity, whereas performative singing connotes a separation between singer and audience. Within the context of seven-shape gospel, however, performative functions do not necessarily imply performance. On the contrary, many seven-shape gospel singings and conventions will include aspects, such as special music offerings by visiting quartets, that are not considered as performances, but rather as acts of worship. Historically, sacred music has alternated between periods of congregational participation in both singing and other sacred rituals and periods in which choirs or church leaders played a more active role in worship, at times disenfranchising the congregation. This distinction parallels the divide between old and new within sacred music which has historically oscillated between eras of great innovation and those of reactionary stasis, as what was once creative and revolutionary becomes old and traditional, in turn engendering new innovations and creating an enduring cycle of controversial change. The divide between traditional and contemporary worship styles also figures prominently into the discussion of participatory and performance-based worship. Traditional worship is widely associated with participatory congregational singing, whereas contemporary worship is linked with performance-based worship groups that sing *for* the church. As contemporary worship evolved in the United States during the latter part of the twentieth century, hymnologists began to study the impact of the shift away from participatory congregational singing. John L. Bell described the impact of the societal transition towards performance, writing, “In the West we are going into unchartered territory where music is increasingly seen as something which is the preserve of gifted individuals whom others are expected to listen to and admire. The more this aspect of culture prevails, the less will ordinary people perceive that it is their prerogative to sing and participate in communal music-making. Therefore when the Church invites people to sing hymns, it is doing something profoundly counter-cultural.” John L. Bell, *The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000), 118.

<sup>97</sup> “Public Singing in Boone,” *Watauga Democrat*, 16 November 1905.

While the hymns were “much enjoyed” and plans were made to incorporate “this delightful feature” into the service on a monthly basis, the definition of *Christian Harmony* hymns as old-time and performed by older residents demonstrated that the early oblong tunebook traditions were in sharp decline as a component of participatory worship.<sup>98</sup>

This decline was corroborated in interviews with local church members, many of whom recalled the existence of earlier shape-note traditions, but had no personal experience with them. Ruth Hodges Shew, a member at Mount Lebanon Baptist Church, owned an early edition of *The Christian Harmony* tunebook that belonged to her grandfather, a minister in Watauga County:

This belonged to my grandfather, who was a minister here in Watauga County. He was a traveling minister. That was back in the days when they rode horse-back and he had this book. And my mother says he could sing, but I never heard him sing. But anyway, this book came from him.<sup>99</sup>

Similarly, Mt. Lebanon’s choir director Dale Hayes remembered his mother and uncle singing from *The Christian Harmony*:

My mother was a wonderful singer. She and my Uncle Stewart, maybe another one or two ... they used to—times—sing like a quartet the old *Christian Harmony*, out of *The Christian Harmony* book. That thing is sung in a minor sound. It’s [got] a different sound to it. But now, [in so] far as really partaking [of] the singing in something like that—no.<sup>100</sup>

Mountain Dale Baptist choir director Clint Cornett also remembered a local couple who sang from *The Christian Harmony*:

We used to sing with a couple, Don Perry and his wife Ruby ... but they sang, you know, *Christian Harmony*, and they sung with Perry Ashley and sometimes Jay

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<sup>98</sup> “Old Time Choir Sings at Boone Advent Church,” *Watauga Democrat*, 25 June 1931.

<sup>99</sup> Ruth Shew, interview with author, digital recording, 10 March 2009, Boone, North Carolina.

<sup>100</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author, digital recording, 03 March 2009, Boone, North Carolina.



Shore. But that's basically the only people that I ever heard get up and sing out of the book.<sup>101</sup>

Due to their decline, by the 1950s the older shape-note styles had attracted the interest of folk revivalists who sought out the oldest and most traditional music for preservation and performance. An article in the *Watauga Democrat* from 1956, "Old Song Books Being Sought," highlighted the role of outside collectors and folklorists who specifically sought out older shape-note traditions to document and preserve. Noted folklorist Richard Chase spent considerable time in western North Carolina documenting the Jack Tale traditions. According to the 1956 article, he was also interested in early singing traditions of the region and requested that Watauga County citizens visit him at Boone's outdoor theater, Horn in the West, to select songs from older tunebooks for a performance at the summer festival. This shift of sacred repertoire to a secular arena was characteristic of the folk revival movement, which often blurred the boundaries between sacred and secular. The article mentioned selections from *The Christian Harmony* and "other ancient shape-note hymn books" as the repertoire from which Chase was drawing and included a list of the most frequently requested songs at the summer festival: "Angel Band, Wondrous Love, The Garden Hymn, The Hebrew Children, How Tedious and Tasteless the Hours, Over Yonder Ocean, I Will Arise and Go to Jesus, The Wayfaring Stranger, and others."<sup>102</sup> The shift of the four-shape tradition into first a performative and subsequently a revival tradition made room for the seven-shape gospel tradition to flourish in Watauga County.

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<sup>101</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author, digital recording, 11 March 2009, Vilas, North Carolina.

<sup>102</sup> "Old Song Books Being Sought," *Watauga Democrat*, 07 June 1956.

*The Seven-Shape Gospel Singing Convention: A Regional Tradition*

The most prominent vehicle for the seven-shape gospel tradition was the singing convention, and by the turn of the century, Watauga County was hosting semi-annual singing conventions and placing regular announcements in the *Watauga Democrat*. Historically, conventions functioned as opportunities for fellowship and worship through song and were hosted at both public institutions and rural churches. Descriptions of early twentieth century singing conventions frequently included references to the competitive nature of the tradition. From its inception, the seven-shape gospel tradition included a performative component that initially manifested itself in the form of friendly competition between singing classes who, instead of singing together, competed against one another. This was an important departure from four-shape singing conventions that consisted exclusively of participatory congregational singing. An advertisement for the December 1905 convention, for example, listed two competing classes, from Deerfield and White Springs, with the promise of a “handsome silver cup” to the winners of the next singing.<sup>103</sup>

The competitive structure of early twentieth century conventions illustrated the role of individual churches, whose singing schools and classes were the primary participants. On September 26, 1929, an ad announced the upcoming county convention and listed “lower Meat Camp church” as the host. To this day, local churches function as hosts of the county convention, underscoring the important connection between independent congregations and the seven-shape tradition. According to newspaper articles, host duties rotated among churches, with Brushy Fork, Mount Vernon, and Meat Camp Baptist churches playing

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<sup>103</sup> Untitled, *Watauga Democrat*, 14 December 1905.

significant roles. In addition to rural churches, the county courthouse hosted one convention per year, as documented in an ad placed on June 6, 1929.

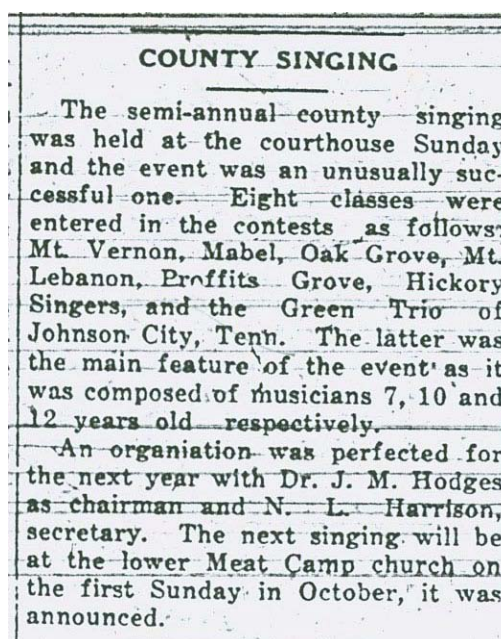


Figure 3. County Singing Announcement. *Watauga Democrat*, 06 June 1929.

Significantly, Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church was included as a participating class, underscoring its role as a long-standing member within the seven-shape gospel community. As many of the churches listed were either independent or independent missionary Baptist, this particular advertisement underscored the role of the independent Baptist church as the primary participant of the tradition in Watauga County.

While most newspaper announcements referred to churches and activities within Watauga County, some articles provided clear indicators of a regional singing tradition as well. On May 22, 1930, an announcement described attendance at the annual singing convention as consisting of both “various classes of the county” and of “many classes from adjoining counties.” The regional aspect of the early conventions was underscored in an

October 9, 1930, announcement that described the convention as “the most widely attended and of greater general interest than any preceding gathering ... Large crowds came from all sections of this and adjoining counties.” Additionally, many neighboring counties and states placed ads for their own conventions in the *Watauga Democrat*, including the Ashe County, East Tennessee and East Virginia singing communities.

Data from the 1931-1933 Appalachian Religion Survey, which included neighboring Avery County in its sample, painted a similar picture of the seven-shape gospel tradition, accentuating the important role of rural, independent churches that worked together to create a regional singing community.<sup>104</sup> Survey records documented an “entirely rural church situation”<sup>105</sup> and emphasized difficulties in transportation, noting the relative isolation of mountain communities and the small size of churches:

The churches are, almost without exception, small. Most of the people even now seem to prefer this situation. Weak organizations were inevitable when means of communication were poor, and the people, used to this for several generations, have come to regard it as the natural or even best situation. In the past it has been the general rule that when a church reached any size, has a hundred members, a group living near each other would separate from this main church and set up an independent one nearer their homes.<sup>106</sup>

The survey also described music and worship styles, recording evidence of a widespread singing tradition.

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<sup>104</sup> From 1931 to 1933, The Institute of Social and Religious Research funded an extensive survey of the Appalachian region, selecting seventeen counties across West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky. Over the course of two years, field workers collected data from over one thousand churches. This study of Appalachian religion was coordinated with the United States Department of Agriculture’s economic and social study of the region. While Watauga was not selected as a sample county, neighboring Avery County was included, thus providing insight into regional worship practices in western North Carolina in the 1930s.

<sup>105</sup> “Church Situation in Avery County,” Appalachian Religion Survey.

<sup>106</sup> “Church Situation in Avery County.”



Figure 4. Map of Watauga and Surrounding Counties: “Map Showing Approximately the County Boundaries Before Avery County Was Formed,” Appalachian Religion Survey 1931-1933, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College.

According to survey data, in the 1930s rural western North Carolina churches hosted all-day singings, revivals, and singing conventions. Survey notes primarily described seven-shape gospel music, although one example of a “lined-off” tradition was included. The following description of an all-day singing convention in neighboring Tennessee included identifiers of the seven-shape gospel tradition, such as the use of popular shape-note convention books, the format of the singing itself, and the prominence of quartet singing:

In Webb’s Creek, five miles about Pitman Center, Sevier County, Tennessee, singing classes from several miles around had gathered for an all-day singing. I was there in the morning. Seventy-five singers about were there, and more were expected in the afternoon ... The whole time was spent in singing, with but short pauses in between. Three different leaders conducted the singing, three numbers each. They used a tuning fork to get the pitch. A few numbers were sung with do re mi before the words were used, but most were not. The leaders were teachers of the local groups ... The book used [was] “Victory Voices,” published by James D. Vaughn, music publisher, Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, 1931. They get new books each year. The numbers were all hymns. They were not the best harmonically, but better than a good deal of revival music. Each had a chorus. And most of the choruses gave bits to one or more different parts. The time and pitch were carefully observed, and it was nearly always possible to get the words. Rests scrupulously observed. Some beat time. Quality not so good, best in bass. The soprano had voices that had that

thin, shrill note. Very little of the old slurring. I noticed this only in one or two quarters. Too loud. Noise evidently thought desirable rather than quality. Sometimes a singsong effect, especially in one of the quartettes. It must be hard to sing so many hours without spoiling the voices.<sup>107</sup>

In addition to providing background information about regional patterns and traditions, this particular survey also stressed both the inherently rural and predominantly Baptist identity of the singing traditions it described. The comprehensive survey required a site visit to each church in Avery County, and between July 9 and July 15, 1930, Ms. Jean Adams and Ms. Elizabeth Hooker visited seventy-three churches. While twelve different denominations were surveyed, Baptist churches accounted for thirty-eight of the congregations, more than half of the churches in the county. The survey categorized the county churches into three sizes based on population numbers: small village (250-500 people), hamlet (25-250 people), and open country. Of the seventy-three churches surveyed, twenty-four indicated an active singing tradition.<sup>108</sup> Of those, nineteen were located in the open country and only four were reported in a hamlet. No singing traditions were mentioned from the churches located in a small village, thus supporting the premise of the seven-shape gospel tradition as a primarily rural phenomenon. Of the twenty-four reports that described singing traditions, twenty were from Baptist congregations, underscoring the correlation between rural Baptist churches and seven-shape gospel.

The descriptions of the singing at the various rural churches highlighted characteristics of the seven-shape gospel movement, including singing schools, classes, and conventions, unequivocally linking regional singing with the seven-shape gospel tradition. Descriptions of the singing ranged from short phrases specific to a church's music program

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<sup>107</sup> "Notes, Avery County," Appalachian Religion Survey.

<sup>108</sup> "Avery County Churches," Appalachian Religion Survey.

to lengthier statements indicating a regional tradition. The notation for Chestnut Dale Baptist Church between Hughes and Minneapolis, North Carolina, for example, read “singing school of about twenty,”<sup>109</sup> while the entry on Oak Grove Baptist Church, located near Millers Gap, described their bi-weekly singing class, “Singing every Sunday and Wednesday nights—attend thirty-five.”<sup>110</sup> The description of the singing at Belview Baptist Church, near Cranberry, on the other hand, listed a singing class, a convention, and travel to other churches for fellowship through song: “Singing class meets for a week before every convention on fifth Sunday—about eighteen in class—Singing class usually visits other churches eight or ten times during a year.”<sup>111</sup>

Rural churches in western North Carolina were the most active participants in the flourishing seven-shape gospel community up to the 1930s, teaching singing schools and participating in the popular conventions. However, seven-shape gospel music was constantly evolving towards its eventual professionalization and articles describing singings and conventions began to emphasize its entertainment value as early as 1930. An article in the *Watauga Democrat* dated October 9, 1930, referred to the singing as “entertainment,”<sup>112</sup> a sentiment that became more pronounced over time. While the role of performance was steadily increasing within the genre, it is clear that worship remained a central focus of the tradition. A 1938 ad described the county singing as “the greatest day of worship through song” and encouraged choirs and singers to “bring the best sacred music” to “make

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<sup>109</sup> “Chestnut Dale Baptist Church,” Appalachian Religion Survey, 13 July 1931.

<sup>110</sup> “Oak Grove Baptist Church,” Appalachian Religion Survey, 01 July 1931.

<sup>111</sup> “Belview Baptist Church,” Appalachian Religion Survey, 10 July 1931.

<sup>112</sup> “County Singing Sunday was Largely Attended,” *Watauga Democrat*, 9 October 1930.

everybody happy with the spirit of song.”<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, most descriptions of local singings mentioned a Bible study, underscoring the foundational connection between the seven-shape tradition and worship.

The combination of participatory and performative functions resulted in widely attended community celebrations, as singers and listeners alike gathered to enjoy seven-shape gospel music. By the late 1930s, the Watauga County conventions had outgrown their rural host churches and moved to the Gospel Tabernacle in downtown Boone. In June of 1938, the mayor of Boone offered the opening address at the singing, indicating the visible role that the tradition played within the larger community. In addition to working closely with the town, which hosted the semi-annual convention in the courthouse once per year, the convention also partnered with visiting evangelicals and revivalists, drawing even larger crowds to singing events. In October of 1938, Reverend Dan Graham, a popular evangelist, was scheduled to preach following the day-long singing event, which was expected to draw “several thousands” of people. On September 29, 1938, the Boone mayor addressed the issues of overcrowding and congestion due to high attendance in the *Watauga Democrat*: “With Homecoming Day at Appalachian College, the county singing and Rev. Dan Graham’s sermon in prospect, we expect the largest crowd in Boone next Saturday perhaps in the history of the city.”<sup>114</sup> The mayor’s juxtaposition of Appalachian’s Homecoming with the county singing underscored the extent of the singing’s popularity and the vital and visible role it played within the larger community.

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<sup>113</sup> “County Singing,” *Watauga Democrat*, 02 June 1938.

<sup>114</sup> *Watauga Democrat*, 29 September 1938.



*Commercial and Rural Identities of Seven-Shape Gospel*

The popularity of conventions within the community made them an excellent vehicle for the commercialization of the tradition, best exemplified by the large-scale “Singing on the Mountain,” an event that originated as an opportunity for all-day singing, but then slowly evolved into an all-day performance. J. L. Hartley, chairman of the Watauga County singing convention, founded the event in 1925 as an outdoor festival held on the slopes of Grandfather Mountain. While local singing classes were invited as late as the 1950s, their participation was performance-based, providing entertainment for those in attendance. In addition to regional singing classes, professional quartets were invited to entertain, highlighting the growing commercial identity of the seven-shape gospel movement. In 1955, thirty-five thousand participants were counted at the popular outdoor convention, described as a “colorful program” consisting of performances by professional and non-professional singers alike.<sup>115</sup> In 1956, thirty thousand gathered to celebrate the “largest and oldest mountain musical event,” characterized by the performances of a number of well-known quartets and singing personalities.<sup>116</sup>

The descriptions of the annual summer event at Grandfather Mountain provided a sharp contrast to the advertisements for local, county, and regional singings and indicated a growing divide between the rural seven-shape gospel movement and its commercial counterpart. While the summer singing drew tens of thousands of listeners and received extensive coverage in the *Watauga Democrat*, local churches continued to gather together for semi-annual conventions on a significantly smaller scale. No longer mentioning crowds in

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<sup>115</sup> “35,000 Participate in Grandfather Singing,” *Watauga Democrat*, 30 June 1955.

<sup>116</sup> “30,000 Converge for Grandfather Singing,” *Watauga Democrat*, 28 June 1956.

the thousands like those that had characterized singing conventions in the 1930s, newspaper articles heralded smaller successes, including the 1945 October singing that drew “thirty classes.”<sup>117</sup>

While newspaper coverage seems to indicate a decline in local singing conventions, Mountain Dale choir director Clint Cornett remembered the 1960s and 1970s as the heyday for the local convention and singing community. The incongruity between newspaper coverage and the persistence of the rural singing tradition is partially explained by the decision of rural singers to create and sustain a variety of different choirs and singing opportunities outside of the public arena. From the 1960s to the 1980s, singers from independent churches in the county gathered on one Saturday evening per month, typically the third Saturday, to sing and fellowship together. Cornett, chairman of both the county convention and the informal association of singers at the time, coined this gathering the “monthly Saturday night singing” that rotated between rural churches. This singing was not advertised in the local papers, highlighting its distinction from the more formal county convention and the commercial “Singing on the Mountain.” When asked how singers would know about the time and location of the rotating event, Cornett replied that announcements would be made at the singings themselves and that singers would contact one another individually in the case of cancellation. While sings were not closed to the public, Cornett acknowledged that the singers hailed predominantly from a predictable list of independent Baptist churches with strong ties to the seven-shape gospel tradition and also that outside participation was rare.

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<sup>117</sup> “County Singing to be Held Here October 7,” *Watauga Democrat*, 13 September 1945.

While not publicized, these Saturday night singings were organized in a fashion similar to that of the county convention, with choirs and quartets singing for one another. Cornett remembered that church members would also come out to listen to the music, distinguishing between the fellowship at rural singings and the performer-audience paradigm of the commercial “Singing on the Mountain.” Cornett, as chairperson, would speak with singers and choirs as they entered, creating an informal program consisting primarily of the Baptist choirs that were the main participants within this informal association, including Mountain Dale, Timber Ridge, Bethel, Beaver Dam, Zion Hill, Union, Mabel and Mount Lebanon Baptist churches. While the majority of the “monthly Saturday night singing” was comprised of choir and quartet singing, Cornett indicated that the singing typically concluded with a congregational song, “Not Made With Hands” being a popular choice.<sup>118</sup>

In the 1960s, a group of dedicated singers, many of whom were active in both the county convention and the informal Saturday night singings, banded together to form the “country choir.” Meeting weekly to practice and sing shape-note music, this group functioned outside of the public sphere and did not print advertisements or announcements in the local paper. Initially, the group began practicing at the Shore family home,<sup>119</sup> but as the choir grew in numbers, the singers decided to build a facility for singing. Several singers signed both the original deed to the land and the small building loan required to complete construction on what became known as “the singing house.” This small, one-room building, which could hold up to eighty singers, was designed for the sole purpose of singing and its location on Route 421 was chosen for its centrality and accessibility. The main participants

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<sup>118</sup> Clint Cornett, conversation with author, field notes, 24 February 2010, Vilas, North Carolina.

<sup>119</sup> Members of the Shore family were active participants in the local seven-shape gospel singing tradition, as well as prominent figures within the independent Baptist community in Watauga County.

in the choir were from local Baptist churches, including Mountain Dale, Zion Hill, Middle Fork, Mount Vernon, Mount Lebanon, Willow Valley, Mabel, Pleasant Grove, and Sandy Flat. While a few singers from Mt. Zion Methodist Church in Ashe County participated, it was comprised predominantly of Baptist singers.

The country choir sang out of new convention books, including Vaughan and Stamps-Baxter Quartet materials, as well as books from the Tennessee Music and Printing Company. Cornett recalled that the purpose of this group was to serve the needs of the local church community. The country choir encouraged song directors and singers to attend their rehearsals, to learn about music and musicianship, and to thereby strengthen the music in their home church. In addition to supporting local churches with musicianship training, the country choir served at many revivals throughout the region, providing special music in the form of quartets and ensemble singing. While this group sang and fellowshiped together for close to ten years, by the late 1960s, interest was waning and the group sold “the singing house” to one of its alto singers who turned the building into his home. Given the private nature of both the country choir and the Saturday night singing, it is not possible to corroborate these accounts with newspaper articles or other documentation. However, the churches that Cornett listed as participants in the informal singing and the country choir figure prominently in the active seven-shape community today, underscoring a longstanding singing tradition within many rural churches.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Clint Cornett, conversation with author.

*A Tradition in Transition: Seven-Shape Gospel Music within Rural Churches*

While rural churches continued to congregate and sing together informally, a clear divide was emerging between the participatory and performative identities of the seven-shape gospel tradition. This shift was emphasized in the 1959 Southern Appalachian Studies Survey that included an extensive review of Appalachian churches and religion.<sup>121</sup> While Watauga was not selected as a sample county for this survey, three neighboring counties were chosen, offering insight into a regional understanding of singing traditions in rural mountain communities in the late 1950s. Of the counties selected for the survey, the three most relevant to this study are Grayson County in southwest Virginia, Carter County in northeast Tennessee, and Burke County in North Carolina. (See figure 5)

Mirroring data from the 1931-1933 Appalachian Religion Survey, field notes maintained by survey area supervisors described the region as rural and mountainous with a predominantly Baptist population. Of the sample churches selected in Burke County, North Carolina, Fieldworker Neil McGlamery counted only one Methodist congregation; the remaining nine were different Baptist traditions.<sup>122</sup> The list of churches compiled for each

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<sup>121</sup>As one of fourteen areas of study, the review of church life and religious practice was intended to assess the “religious conditions in mountain areas; church growth or decay; types of religious experiences; emotionalism; fatalism; predestinarianism; fundamentalism; and possible steps toward better conditions.” Seeking to identify changes in the Appalachian region since the 1930s survey, the Southern Appalachian Studies project examined twenty-seven counties and three cities during the summer of 1959. In each county, an area supervisor and a team of field workers selected a geographic focus within which they compiled a comprehensive list of all churches they could find. Of these, ten were randomly selected to form a sample out of which three churches were chosen for in-depth review. This review entailed interviews with the pastor, several leaders in the congregation, church members, and also with non-members in the surrounding community. Additionally, the field workers recorded at least one worship service at each of the churches selected for in-depth review, and also an informal focus group with church members. For more information about the survey procedure, see “Notes,” Southern Appalachian Studies, 1962, Southern Appalachian Archives.

<sup>122</sup> Neil McGlamery, “Field Worker’s Notebook, Sample Area 43, Week One,” Southern Appalachian Studies.

county documented a large number of independent, free will and missionary Baptist congregations. Despite the overwhelmingly rural nature of the region, the survey highlighted tensions surrounding urban influences that were emerging in the 1950s and which mirrored the growing divide between participatory and performative worship styles, the latter growing out of urban centers and spreading to rural areas.<sup>123</sup>



Figure 5. Map of Watauga and Surrounding Counties. “The Southern Appalachians,” *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), ii, shading by author.

In addition to their personal observations and notes, fieldworkers interviewed key members of each church selected for in-depth study, working from an interview guide comprised of open-ended questions about faith and belief systems. These interviews included a substantial number of “provocative statements,” which the interview subjects

<sup>123</sup> The correlation between increased performative function of sacred music and urban environments can be traced to the nineteenth century Better Music Movement that spread from urban centers to rural congregations, eventually displacing homegrown musical traditions with professional musical styles.

rated on a scale of one to five, one indicating a “strong agreement” with the statement and five indicating a “strong disagreement.” Several statements referred specifically to music within the church, highlighting its vital role within church identity. Of the thirty-two statements read to each interview subject, three addressed music traditions specifically, while two referenced them indirectly.

The first of the three direct statements read “In church, I think it is better for everybody to join in singing hymns than to listen to the choir sing,” exploring the shift from participatory to performative singing traditions. Within the three selected counties, an overwhelming 57 percent “agreed” that congregational singing is more valuable than the choir, with an additional 11 percent agreeing “strongly.”<sup>124</sup> While 20 percent were undecided, only 12 percent disagreed. This overwhelming support for congregational song provided a stark contrast with the sharp decline thereof as the seven-shape gospel movement evolved into an increasingly performative genre. As the seven-shape gospel tradition moved toward a commercial identity, the rural church choir emerged as both choral group and congregational singing entity, complicating the distinction between participation and performance. The large, informal church choir figures prominently into the discussion of the rural identity of seven-shape gospel and will be explored at length in chapter four.

The second direct statement about music traditions emphasized the enduring tension between old and new in sacred song: “I like to sing the old gospel songs, rather than the new

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<sup>124</sup> These percentages are based on the author’s data compilation from the six Baptist churches surveyed in Grayson County, Virginia (Mt Zion Union Baptist Church and Chestnut Hill Baptist Church), Carter County, Tennessee (Watauga Valley Freewill Baptist Church and Poplar Grove Baptist Church), and Burke County, North Carolina (Zion Hill Missionary Baptist Church and Pleasant Hill Baptist Church). All six churches were identified as rural congregations. In an effort to better understand rural Baptist traditions and practices in the 1950s, these calculations do not include responses from other denominations represented in the survey.

hymns.” Given the history of sacred music in the region, which defined four-shape music as old at the turn of the twentieth century, the juxtaposition of “old” gospel songs and “new” hymns in the 1950s highlighted the shifting definitions of traditional and contemporary. While the survey provided no definition for either gospel song or hymn, 62 percent of interview subjects agreed that the older gospel repertoire was superior to new hymnody, with an additional 9 percent agreeing strongly. The emphasis on seven-shape gospel materials and the gospel song has persisted and is a defining characteristic of rural seven-shape singing traditions today.

The final direct statement about music, “I prefer a church where the choir members wear robes,” addressed the formality of worship and underscored a sharp divide along racial lines. While 52 percent of the entire sample disagreed with this statement, members of the African American churches included in the survey overwhelmingly supported it.<sup>125</sup> African American choirs have historically worn robes, creating a visibly distinct group of singers that, by nature of a shared “uniform,” might appear more formal or professional than their un-robed counterparts. White members of the rural communities surveyed almost unanimously disagreed strongly with this statement, likely viewing robes as a visible sign of the professionalization of worship—the very antithesis of their definition of rural, Spirit-led religion. Fieldworker Garland Hendricks described an interview with a rural mail carrier and church leader in Carter County, Tennessee, underscoring the tension between rural communities and their urban counterparts. Paraphrasing his interview subject’s thoughts, Hendricks described the informal approach to religion that defined rural worship habits: “He [interview subject] believes we need more informality at church. People are getting too

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<sup>125</sup>It is not clear whether this statement was included to provide an additional identifier for African American churches whose agreement stood in direct opposition to white opinion.



formal and are losing their spirituality. There are fundamental differences in the needs of rural and urban people with respect to church, work.”<sup>126</sup> Informal, Spirit-led worship continues to define religious tradition within rural independent Baptist churches and figures into an understanding of the contemporary seven-shape tradition in Watauga County.

Two indirect statements also illuminated attitudes about rural worship habits in western North Carolina in the late 1950s. Seventy-five percent of the interview subjects agreed with the following statement, with an additional 8 percent agreeing strongly: “I think churches should have more revivals.” Rural revivals were opportunities for corporate worship and fellowship and frequently included extended periods of singing. Over time, churches also used revivals as opportunities for choirs and quartets to sing for other congregations. Given the prominent role of music within rural revivals, a strong agreement with the statement could indicate an underlying interest in more musical fellowship. The final indirect statement addressed traditional worship practices and beliefs. Sixty-nine percent of the interview subjects agreed with the statement “I like the ‘old time religion,’” with an additional 24 percent agreeing strongly, indicating a preference for traditional worship habits. Although the survey tool did not define the term “old time religion,” scholarship and personal accounts of Appalachian worship frequently correlated “old time” ways with music and singing traditions, implying an enduring preference for older musical practices.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Garland Hendricks, “Field Worker’s Notebook, Sample Area 54, Week One,” *Southern Appalachian Studies*.

<sup>127</sup> The old-fashioned or old-timey worship style within independent Appalachian churches has been studied and portrayed as both an antiquated anachronism and as a traditional worship style worthy of cultural study and preservation. Many descriptions of the “old time way” emphasize music and singing traditions. Larry Morgan emphasized the role of music in his family’s Baptist worship experience in the Nantahala area of western North Carolina: “The service began with two ‘whole note’ songs by the home church singers. The old

A review of singing traditions in Watauga County throughout the twentieth century highlights the evolution of shape-note music in western North Carolina. By the 1930s, as documented in the 1931-1933 Appalachian Religion Survey and in the *Watauga Democrat*, rural churches in western North Carolina had established singing classes and conventions, documenting strong ties to the seven-shape gospel tradition. By the 1950s, churches in the same region maintained rural, traditional worship habits, but were grappling with issues of progressive, urban encroachment that manifested itself in increasingly performative singing practices. The survey tools of the 1959 Southern Appalachian Studies Survey in particular suggested shifts in singing practices, gauging responses to the increased role of the church choir and the development of new hymnody that competed with the old gospel songs. In contrast, semi-private church groups and events, such as the country choir and the Saturday night singings in Watauga County, moved out of the public arena, creating an invisible, rural counterpoint to the increasingly commercialized gospel tradition.

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mountain churches did not have pianos or organs until the late 1940s and early 1950s. They didn't have a 'choir director,' or robes, or a choir loft. The elected 'singing leader' softly sang the musical scale and stopped on the note he wished the gathered singers to sing in. As he held this note, the singers would hum in unison that same pitch until all were in harmony and together. Then, with the leader's voice slightly louder than the others, they sang the selection. Later, a pitch pipe was used to set the pitch. Unlike choir directors in modern churches who direct their choirs with broad gestures, old mountain religion folk did not use such gestures, and frowned on them. The idea was that those gestures brought too much attention to the director, and any singing leader who employed them was thought to be seeking self-aggrandizement. Only occasionally, when the mountain singers were not in accord, would the singing leader use just the palm of his hand to bring everything right." Morgan stressed the lay person's participation in the choir and a distrust of professional music, drawing a direct comparison between his parents' indigenous singing tradition and the music and leadership in modern churches. The distinction between old-fashioned and modern worship practices became an important identifier of Appalachian and non-Appalachian churches, with music and song playing a large role in distinguishing between the two. Larry Morgan, *Old Time Religion in the Southern Appalachians* (Boone, North Carolina: Parkway Publishers, 2005), 34.

*The Seven-Shape Gospel Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*

Seven-shape gospel singing has persisted in Watauga County in the form of a rural singing tradition and a community practice. On the third Saturday evening of every month, the Watauga County gospel singing convenes at 7:00 p.m., rotating between Mabel and Mountain Dale Baptist, two churches that continue in their historic role as convention hosts. The singing follows the traditional pattern of early shape-note conventions, with leaders taking turns directing songs out of the seven-shape gospel books that are ordered annually. Occasionally, singers from neighboring states Virginia and Tennessee will attend, traveling long distances to sing and worship together. Sometimes, a group will offer special music in the form of a duet or quartet, but typically the monthly singing is an opportunity for participatory congregational song within the seven-shape gospel tradition. The singing is open to the entire community and an ad is faithfully placed in the local papers, *The High Country Press* and *The Mountain Times*. While the public announcements encourage community-wide attendance, most of the singers are members of local independent Baptist churches whose singing is rooted in the seven-shape gospel tradition.

The story of the seven-shape gospel tradition in Watauga County shifts therefore to a review of two independent missionary Baptist churches whose worship practices have long been defined by seven-shape gospel. Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale are two churches among many within the seven-shape gospel community today and function therefore as representatives of a larger body of sister churches. A review of the history of each church demonstrates the pivotal role of the seven-shape tradition and illuminates three distinct characteristics commonly associated with both seven-shape gospel and independent Baptists: the large and informal church choir, seven-shape gospel songbooks and hymnals, and a

pervasive attitude of worship. While Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale are both unique congregations with compelling histories, their shared identity as independent Baptist churches has shaped and molded their worship style. In contrast to earlier models of scholarship that presented Appalachian religious identity in comparison with its mainstream counterpart, this review of singing traditions in Watauga County examines other dualities that illuminate the complexity of regional religious traditions, including the distinction between rural and urban styles, old and new influences, formal and informal approaches, and participatory versus performative worship, all of which contribute to an understanding of seven-shape gospel within rural independent Baptist churches.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist Churches: A Case Study

The big churches today, your big Southern Baptist and your United Methodists, you won't go into those churches and find a [shape-note convention] book like this in it, you can forget that. That's the reason I'm gonna hang around on the outside of town and not get down that far into town. I've sung in a quartet since '54. We've been in all kinds of churches. Some of the best we've been in, [are] just little churches with thirty or forty people that loved each other and they loved God and it showed. You would sing and they'd just sing you to death. But that's where you'll find these convention books.

*Clint Cornett, choir director at Mountain Dale Baptist Church*

[Our singing is] more of a country church-style singing. Not that we're just plain old hillbilly. It's more or less the typical kind of singing we've been used to for years and years and years back through a country church like that.

*Dale Hayes, choir director at Mount Lebanon Baptist Church*

In the 1959 Southern Appalachian Studies survey, field worker David Graybeal described two churches in Grayson County, Virginia, as “really one church with two buildings and two pastors,” emphasizing the close ties and familial connections between rural church communities.<sup>128</sup> This sentiment captures the close relationship between Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist, whose overlapping histories reveal striking similarities between the two congregations. As independent missionary Baptist churches, Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale share many worship practices,<sup>129</sup> including a strong singing

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<sup>128</sup> David Graybeal, “Field Worker’s Notebook, Sample Area 63, Week Two,” Southern Appalachian Studies.

<sup>129</sup> In addition to the seven-shape gospel tradition, the following worship rituals and customs serve as common characteristics of independent missionary Baptist worship in Watauga County: J. Newton Brown’s 1853 Baptist Covenant, which hangs prominently in each sanctuary; an active prayer life, as evidenced by the use of prayer rooms and collective altar prayers; and the exclusive use of the King James Version of the Bible.

tradition rooted in seven-shape gospel music. Mount Lebanon member Jeff Wilson described the two churches as sharing a belief system, stating, “It’s that same belief, that sisterhood of belief: we believe in the same God, the same Christ, we’re saved by the same blood, we have the same teaching. It’s just how do we go about that teaching, how do we go about that preaching.”<sup>130</sup> As the two congregations shared a pastor for over thirty years, a practice common among independent churches in the county, Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale have enduring ties that provide a compelling basis for comparison. Carl Wilson was called to pastor at Mountain Dale Baptist from 1953 to 1998 and at Mount Lebanon Baptist from 1968 to 2003. Jeff Wilson, grandson to Preacher Carl, attributed the similarities in worship style among rural independent Baptist churches to the preachers who often pastored multiple congregations:

Back in the day, there weren’t that many pastors. One pastor would pastor three or four churches at one time. Like Preacher Carl, he pastored five at one time and that influence spreads. If people are called to preach out of those churches ... they’re going to have very similar services as that pastor and that’s going to spread. That’s how a lot of these churches have gone out. A lot of these pastors know each other or were called out from Preacher Carl or one of his elderly preachers that he associated with, so you see a lot of that, and it’s like a tree.<sup>131</sup>

During three decades of shared leadership, Wilson encouraged regular exchanges between the two congregations. In many ways they functioned as sister churches, with Mount Lebanon serving families closer to the town of Boone and Mountain Dale serving the rural community of Bethel. Kathy Deas, raised at Mountain Dale Baptist and a current member of Mount Lebanon, remembered the close connection between the two churches, highlighting singing as an important mechanism of fellowship:

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<sup>130</sup> Wilson, interview with author.

<sup>131</sup> Wilson, interview with author.

We had the same pastor, Reverend Carl Wilson, and a lot of times, in years past, when they would have revival at Mount Lebanon, Preacher Carl would ask the choir from Mountain Dale to come and sing. When Mountain Dale had revival, Mount Lebanon's choir would come to sing, so there were a lot of services where both churches were present, you know, because we had the same pastor.<sup>132</sup>

In addition to providing regular opportunities for musical exchange, sharing a pastor elevated music on non-preaching Sundays. The leader of four different congregations, Wilson led only one Sunday morning service per month at each church, allowing for extended worship-through-song in his absence. Thus, on non-preaching Sundays, the music became a primary form of worship, as Kathy Deas remembered:

When there was no preaching, the service always opened up with singing. Then, the superintendent would get up, read the Sunday school lesson, the scripture that we were studying for that day, make announcements, you know, just generally opening up the service. Then the classes would arrange together and we were usually in class maybe about 30-45 minutes. Then we would come back upstairs and sometimes the children from the younger classes would sing or quote scripture or things like that and then the superintendent would dismiss.<sup>133</sup>

Deas also recalled that the singing at both churches was integrally connected to shape notes, explaining, "I think [the music's] very similar, simply because both churches, in their history and their years, have been based on shape-note singing."<sup>134</sup>

In part due to their long history with a shared pastor, the congregations at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale are comprised of many of the same families, especially among church leadership. Wilson attributed the family ties among churches to the rural identity of the county and to the tendency for families to remain within the same denomination over generations:

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<sup>132</sup> Kathy Deas, interview with author, digital recording, 12 March 2009, Boone, North Carolina.

<sup>133</sup> Deas, interview with author.

<sup>134</sup> Deas, interview with author.

It may just be because it's a small area and if people get married and get involved with somebody from another church, they're going to end up going to one church or the other—so it actually pulls that family here and there. So any of these churches you go to, you can see connections, you go back, two or three [generations]—second cousins, third cousins—if it's not brothers or sisters, there's a lot of cousins and aunts or people that are interconnected. They stay within the same faith, just not within the same church.<sup>135</sup>

Both churches have dominant families with multiple generations on the church roll, and it is not unusual for three or four generations to worship together. Additionally, the overlap between the two congregations is significant. The current pastor at Mount Lebanon, Wynn Greer, is nephew to the choir director at Mountain Dale, Clint Cornett. The current pastor at Mountain Dale, Eric Cornett, is first cousin to choir director Cornett and first cousin once removed to preacher Greer at Mount Lebanon. Of special significance to this case study is the genealogical connection between the church choir directors. Stewart Hayes led the choir at Mount Lebanon for over sixty years and is a distant relation to the Cornett family, a member of which has led the choir at Mountain Dale for over fifty years.

Given their familial and pastoral ties, it is not surprising that the worship styles at both churches are very similar. The congregations worship using seven-shape gospel materials, singing from annually-published convention books and the 1951 *Church Hymnal*. The church choir plays a significant role at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale, opening each service with an extended period of singing referred to as the song service. Although the churches changed leadership around the turn of the twenty-first century and no longer share a pastor, the early emphasis on music and singing as a primary form of worship persists. A review of the history of the seven-shape gospel tradition at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale highlights their remarkable similarities. Their differences, however, illuminate the

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<sup>135</sup> Wilson, interview with author.



ways in which a shared shape-note heritage can evolve over time into two slightly different singing traditions, both of which remain rooted in seven-shape gospel.

### *Mount Lebanon Baptist Church*



Figure 6. Aerial View of Watauga County: Mount Lebanon Baptist Church in bold. G. P. Stout, "Watauga County, North Carolina—1982, Roads," (Maps by Mail, Charlotte, North Carolina).

Mount Lebanon Baptist Church was established on May 30, 1891, in the Baird's Creek community of Vilas, North Carolina, in the greater Boone area. Charter members came primarily from neighboring Brushy Fork Baptist, which was constituted in 1858—one of the first churches founded in Watauga County. While the generation that established Mount Lebanon has deceased, current pastor Wynn Greer described the cooperative nature of the church's constitution and the positive relationship it maintained with its mother church, Brushy Fork Baptist:

But Mount Lebanon is unique, because many years ago, Brushy Fork would have revivals with Mount Lebanon. They wouldn't go around the road like we go, they would walk across the mountain ... There's an old trail, I guess you would call it ... They would go up Arnett Holler ... Years ago, they would have revivals. My Grandpa Greer, he talked about doing that. And I think, originally, the people who

organized Mount Lebanon, some of them may have come from Brushy Fork. I'm sure they did. So those churches are linked together in history.<sup>136</sup>

At the time of Mount Lebanon's constitution, the seven-shape gospel tradition was in its formative years, during which the practice was closely connected to both an active teaching tradition and to participatory congregational song. The history published in honor of Mount Lebanon's centennial celebration described the important role of music in the early years of the church:

One of the special gifts God has given Mt. Lebanon is her ability to sing. Although there were no musical instruments in the early days, the voices alone blended into a beautiful melody ... As in the early days, the choir at Mt. Lebanon still soothes the troubled hearts as they raise their voices in song.<sup>137</sup>



Figure 7. Early Choir at Mount Lebanon Baptist Church. *Mount Lebanon Baptist Church: 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1891-1991*.

Mount Lebanon's church minutes also underscored the prominence of music, with many entries listing the specific song that opened a service; for example, on October 15,

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<sup>136</sup> Wynn Greer, interview with author, digital recording, 09 March 2009, Vilas, North Carolina.

<sup>137</sup> *Mount Lebanon Baptist Church: 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1891-1991*.

2003, “Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church met in regular conference with a song ‘Stand Up for Jesus’ and with the reading of 1 Corinthians 16:5-8, Acts 16:6-7, Psalms 114:1-8 and Isaiah 42:16 read by Brother Scott Parsons.”<sup>138</sup> The description of the dedication service for Mount Lebanon’s new sanctuary held on February 15, 1975, also included a list of each song selected. “The service began with the Mt. Lebanon Choir singing the following songs: ‘I Wonder What’s Happened,’ ‘Beyond the Hills of Jordan,’ ‘Where No Shadows Fall,’ ‘Just Beyond the Golden Sunset,’ and ‘Holy Manna.’”<sup>139</sup> The special dedication service for the new sanctuary was a celebration of the church, and the songs chosen for that event would likely have been those with which the choir and congregation were most familiar. Instructively, the repertoire selected consisted almost entirely of seven-shape gospel material.

Mount Lebanon’s historical identity as a seven-shape gospel singing church is largely attributable to the teaching and leadership of Brother Stewart B. Hayes, the church’s second choir director. Over the course of its almost 120 year history, Mount Lebanon has had only three choir directors. John Hayes led the choir for approximately one year and was succeeded by Stewart Hayes, who led the choir from age sixteen well into his nineties. The current director, Dale Hayes, took over the choir from his Uncle Stewart in the 1980s. This progression of choir leaders within the Hayes family has amounted to relative stability within the church’s preferred seven-shape gospel singing tradition.

While little information was recorded about John Hayes, the centennial church history described Stewart Hayes as a talented musician who “faithfully and joyfully led the choir for

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<sup>138</sup> “Mount Lebanon Baptist Church Minutes (1983-Present),” Mount Lebanon Baptist Church, 15 October 2003, 515.

<sup>139</sup> Mount Lebanon Baptist Church Minutes (1891-1983), 15 February 1975, 296.

over sixty years.”<sup>140</sup> He was a devoted singer who likely introduced shape-note singing to the Mount Lebanon congregation and taught the tradition to the choir and congregation, using predominantly seven-shape convention books in worship. Hayes began leading his first choir at Brushy Fork Baptist at the age of twelve. A student at Brushy Fork School through the eighth grade, Hayes later attended the George W. Beacon School in Tennessee, where he learned the rudiments of shape-note music instruction.<sup>141</sup>

Hayes’s commitment to the shape-note tradition emerged as a common theme during interviews with Mount Lebanon church members. Preacher Wynn Greer commented on the teaching abilities of the venerable choir leader: “From him, which goes way back, they were taught that singing is an important part of the church and they put effort into it.”<sup>142</sup> Current choir leader Dale Hayes remembered the attention that his uncle paid to the training of his choir:

When I was just a kid, singing in the choir, my uncle for instance when he was having his singing schools, he’d walk around the choir and he’d listen, and if he caught somebody that wasn’t singing on the tune, he’d correct them and help them to learn what the tune was on that particular song.<sup>143</sup>

In addition to his teaching, Hayes also encouraged the choir to participate in singing competitions and conventions held in the local community and many quartets emerged from Mount Lebanon, including Harmony Home Quartet, The Singing Greenes, and The Hayes

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<sup>140</sup> *Mount Lebanon Baptist Church: 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1891-1991*.

<sup>141</sup> Evelyn Greer, “Stewart Blaine and Esther Cornelia Coffey Hayes,” *The Heritage of Watauga County, North Carolina, Volume I*, 237-238.

<sup>142</sup> Wynn Greer, interview with author.

<sup>143</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

Family. While there are no active quartets in the congregation at this time, member Karen Jones recalled her participation in a shape-note ensemble:

At one time, it was me and my brother, and my cousin and his wife, [we] had a group and we would sing. And then they moved away to a different church so that kind of got rid of that. Yes, Sonrise Quartet, S-O-N-R-I-S-E. We did that for a long, long time. And we would sing there and we'd go places and sing too.<sup>144</sup>

Hayes also wrote many songs in the seven-shape gospel tradition, of which one, “Calvary’s Cross,” was published, further rooting himself and the Mount Lebanon choir in the seven-shape gospel tradition.<sup>145</sup> Significantly, Charles Isley dedicated some of the selections at Three Forks Baptist’s bicentennial celebration of sacred music to early singing school instructors in the county, referring to Stewart Hayes by name. Upon his death in 1980, after six decades of faithful leadership, church member Judy Hodges wrote a tribute to Hayes in the church history, underscoring his contribution to the enduring song tradition:

There was a gentle man  
With softest silver hair  
He raised his hands toward heaven  
And led Mt. Lebanon choir

His voice was soft and tender  
As the notes began to flow  
This choir was filled with grandeur  
And soon everyone would know

The songs upon their lips  
Was given just to show  
They served the Living One  
And in His love did grow

This strong but patient leader  
Stood for some sixty years  
To lead this choir with joy  
Along with pain and lots of tears

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<sup>144</sup> Karen Jones, interview with author, digital recording, 07 March 2009, Boone, North Carolina.

<sup>145</sup> Judy Hodges, “Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church,” *The Heritage of Watauga County, North Carolina, Volume I*, 81-83.

Christians came from other places  
 To glimpse this humble man  
 Who gave himself to others  
 And led them with his hand

Years did come and years did go  
 Time just slipped away  
 Then one day in early Spring  
 The angels took this man away

Sometimes on Sunday morning  
 When the choir sings sweet and low  
 If you listen very quietly  
 You might hear a voice  
 You once did know

It's that of Brother Stewart  
 Whose body is now gone  
 But his presence will be with us  
 As we sing out in song<sup>146</sup>

In 1980, Stewart's nephew Dale Hayes assumed the role of choir director. Growing up in the neighborhood of the church, Hayes described his lifelong membership at Mount Lebanon: "As far as going to church, other than the time I was in the army, I've gone to Mount Lebanon all my life ... I was raised in that church. I've just always enjoyed it. I guess you get used to something like that."<sup>147</sup> In addition to having been raised in the church, Hayes grew up in the choir, learning to sing with his family under the leadership of his uncle:

It was sort of a natural thing, my family, because they were singers, I guess Momma and Dad probably had me to go in the choir ... my Dad sang bass and my mother was alto. And, best I remember is, as a little boy, I was sitting up there, not on the very front row, but on the second row back, when my uncle was leading.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Judy Hodges, "In Memory of Brother Stewart Hayes," *Mount Lebanon Baptist Church: 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1891-1991*.

<sup>147</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

<sup>148</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

Hayes also described the transition from choir member to choir leader after his uncle passed away, highlighting both the continuation of leadership within one family, and the informal process of the transition: “It fell on me to do that, because I was singing the soprano or lead when my uncle died and somebody [had] to get up there and call out the numbers and get the choir going and it just sort of fell on me to do the thing.”<sup>149</sup>

In his role as choir director, Hayes continued using shape-note songbooks and gospel hymnals, even though he acknowledges that few in the congregation and choir read the shapes today. Since many of the choir members actually read regular musical notation, the shapes are not critical to the choir’s abilities. As Hayes noted, “See, so many of them have learned the round notes, you know—A,B,C—that type of singing. They would have learned that somewhere, [maybe] school. They depend on their round note style, whereas there’s about so many that would depend just on the shape-note part.”<sup>150</sup> Some of Hayes’s decision not to continue to teach shape-note as a sight reading tool is personal, as he prefers older hymns with less of the characteristic seven-shape gospel rhythm:

The older type singing, the way it used to be back then, they loved, I always call it, cut-up singing--in other words a whole lot of different parts leading out so much at a time, after-beats and things like that, you know. I don’t especially care that much for it myself, that type of thing.<sup>151</sup>

While Hayes recently ordered a set of seven-shape convention books for the choir, he more regularly leads out of the *Church Hymnal* or out of binders that include older convention songs that he puts together for the choir’s use, building a stable repertoire of songs:

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<sup>149</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

<sup>150</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

<sup>151</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

I prefer more so something like this, just getting a bunch of songs the choir can sing good and put it in something like that and sing it instead of trying to take a convention book and just learn new songs every year just over and over and over.<sup>152</sup>

Regardless of the persistence of the teaching mechanism of the shapes themselves, Hayes has led and maintained a worship-focused choir that church members positively identify as old-fashioned and traditional. When asked to describe their music, Mount Lebanon member Karen Jones defined the music within the contemporary/traditional paradigm, emphasizing the role of the songbooks and hymnals that help identify the singing tradition:

Ok, we are not contemporary. I wouldn't consider us old-fashioned, so I don't know where you'd put that ... I enjoy what we do! Just the piano and singing is all I think we need. So, I don't know how I would explain what kind of music we do. Just, I love the old hymns ... Well, I would consider old-fashioned [to be] no music. You know, the old, old, old hymnals, probably, is what I would consider old-fashioned. But, I guess we're somewhere in the middle. We're probably, we probably lean more toward old-fashioned than we do the more contemporary, I suppose.<sup>153</sup>

Pastor Wynn Greer echoed Jones's description of an older, more traditional sound, highlighting the importance of singing as a spiritual act of worship:

If I had to describe it, I'd say it's spiritual, but not noisy. It's not—I guess there's a whole lot more [of] what it's not. It's not worldly—it doesn't make you pat your foot, it would speak to your heart. To me, Mount Lebanon is very spiritual in their [music] ... I could pick them out from anybody. Melodic, would that be a good word? Because their sound is, I would say, soothing, melodic, spiritual.<sup>154</sup>

Hayes himself also related the music of Mount Lebanon to its choir: "It's always been a bunch of people that love to sing that was in our choir up there ... I guess it's just something

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<sup>152</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

<sup>153</sup> Karen Jones, interview with author.

<sup>154</sup> Wynn Greer, interview with author.



passed down the line ... we've always had a good choir.”<sup>155</sup> The combination of the songbooks, the church choir, and an emphasis on music as a form of worship define the seven-shape gospel tradition at Mount Lebanon, a tradition that persists in practice, if not in theory.

*Mountain Dale Baptist Church*



Figure 8. Aerial Map of Watauga County: Mountain Dale Baptist Church in bold. G. P. Stout, “Watauga County, North Carolina—1982, Roads,” (Maps by Mail, Charlotte, North Carolina).

Mountain Dale Baptist Church was founded on November 2, 1941, fifty years after Mount Lebanon, in the Bethel community of Vilas, North Carolina. At that time, the seven-shape gospel tradition was becoming increasingly professional and performative, characterized by quartet singings and commercial recordings. Charter members came from Beaver Dam, Bethel, and Forest Grove Baptist Churches, all seven-shape gospel singing congregations located in the open country near the Avery County line. Current choir director Clint Cornett recalled the constitution of Mountain Dale, describing both the need for small

<sup>155</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

churches in rural communities and the friendly, supportive relationship between sister churches:

This church, Mountain Dale Baptist Church, was established in 1941. At that time, I was ten years old and there was not a church in the community. And we walked, those of us that went to church. We had no transportation, [and] we had to walk from here to Bethel Church which is two miles. Some went to Bethel, some went to Beaver Dam. Beaver Dam is about two miles on up the road and Bethel's about two miles down the road, so we're in between. And since ... the ways of travel at that time was so limited, that's the reason for the churches being so thick in this area. There's one on every corner and most of them have kept going up till now. This Bethel Church and Beaver Dam, that's where the members came from that constituted Mountain Dale Baptist Church—there was only twenty-five members, the charter members of Mountain Dale Church. There was twenty-five: twelve of them were from Bethel and twelve were from Beaver Dam. That's twenty-four, and one was from Forest Grove, and that's another church on over the ridge, about five to six miles from here. Anyway, that's where the members came from and it was not a split off of them. In fact, those older brothers and sisters, they helped to establish Mountain Dale—they came in and helped with it.<sup>156</sup>

Constituted from shape-note singing congregations, the initial members and choir would have been familiar with seven-shape gospel, a tradition that persisted under the leadership of various choir directors at Mountain Dale. Of these, members of the Cornett family have figured most prominently into the musical leadership of the church. Clint's father, Clyde Cornett, and his grandfather, Mr. Charley Phillips, were among the early choir directors at Mountain Dale and they also taught singing schools throughout the county:

Because my grandfather Phillips, he was the first song leader, alright. Charley Phillips, he was the first song leader and he came from Beaver Dam, and Beaver Dam's always had singing schools. And so did Bethel at that time, they all had singing schools. So Grandpa Phillips, he brought that along. And then my Dad, of course, he caught onto that real fast, he really did. He was the second song leader ... and he led for a couple of years and he really got interested, I mean he'd stay up nights and study and read and how he learned is the same way I learned.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>157</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

Emily Cornett, grand-niece to Clint Cornett, discussed the importance of this heritage, emphasizing the shape-note lineage and teaching tradition within the church:

And our great-grandpa, the road's named after him—Clyde—he built the road. And so, he used to be a preacher, I guess you know that. He used to be a preacher and my grandpa has told me that he taught singing schools around the county and places and my aunt remembers going with him when he taught singing schools. And I've really always loved that heritage of knowing that my grandpa taught—he's my great grandfather and Clint is my great-uncle.<sup>158</sup>

Since Mountain Dale sits on the Avery County line, near the Beech Mountain community, Clint Cornett remembered attending singings and singing schools with his father Clyde at a number of the churches surveyed in the 1930-1931 Survey on Appalachian Religion, including Fall Creek, Henson Creek, and Power Mill Baptist Churches. Cornett recalled the history of teaching that he inherited from his father:

Mountain Dale has always had a good choir. At that particular time my dad was leading. He spent his life in shape notes, singing and teaching singing schools and I picked up a lot from that. He never had any professional training; neither have I. He just learned it himself, that's the way I done it for the most part.<sup>159</sup>

Cornett taught his own first singing school at Flat Springs Baptist Church, another church included in the Avery County survey.

The emphasis on teaching and learning the “notes” is a necessary component of the choir's experience at Mountain Dale. Given the predominant use of seven-shape convention books to provide new materials, the singers must be prepared to sight-read and learn new songs. Though not confused with the primacy of worship, learning and instruction is therefore pivotal and instrumental to the tradition at Mountain Dale. Celebrated shape-note

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<sup>158</sup> Emily Cornett, interview with author, digital recording, 17 April 2009, Vilas, North Carolina.

<sup>159</sup> Meghan Baker, “A Modern Shape Note Disciple: An Oral History of Clint Cornett,” *Appalachia: Ways of Seeing, Ways of Knowing, A Compilation* (Boone, North Carolina: Appalachian State University, 2000), 75.

teacher David Armistead commented on the emphasis on instruction at the church in an interview for the documentary *Blue Ridge Shape Notes: Singing a New Song in an Old Way*:

Mabel and Mountain Dale Baptist Churches, we taught in both of them, but they're superior in singing shape notes to most churches, because they've kept it up and they work on it. They continuously work on it. They get new books each year and they practice it and they fine tune it.<sup>160</sup>

When asked to describe the music of the choir and church, Kathy Deas connected it to shape notes: "Simply because being there at Mountain Dale, that's all we sang, was shape note. That's all we had."<sup>161</sup> Cornett placed this singing tradition within the context of teaching and learning: "It's been the joy of my life since 1954, because I have thoroughly enjoyed it and have had lots of fun doing it ... Shape note singing is not only a perfect way to learn a song and a correct way to learn a song, but it's fun."<sup>162</sup>

This emphasis on instruction is most pronounced in the annual singing schools held at Mountain Dale.<sup>163</sup> While Cornett has taught singing schools at Mountain Dale in the past, he now usually brings in an outside leader and instructor for the week-long session. Kathy Deas remembered the singing schools of her childhood and adolescence at Mountain Dale:

Now, of course, you know, in my younger teenage years and young adult years, Clint taught singing schools, [and] before Clint was teaching singing schools, his dad taught singing schools, Preacher Clyde. And you know ... I'm trying to think, in my younger years, how often we had them. And I can't really remember, but I know, in my teenage years, I can remember going to a lot of churches with Clint, as he was

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<sup>160</sup> *Blue Ridge Shape Notes: Singing a New Song in an Old Way*. DVD. Directed by Mary Green (Boone, North Carolina: Watauga County Arts Council, 2004).

<sup>161</sup> Kathy Deas, interview with author.

<sup>162</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>163</sup> During the course of my research, I attended the annual singing school at Mountain Dale in the fall of 2009. Taught by David Armistead, this singing school was attended by members of both Mountain Dale and Mount Lebanon, highlighting their enduring ties as well as their commitment to the shape-note singing tradition. David Armistead teaches shape-note music as a full-time ministry to which he was called in 1995.

going around teaching singing schools. And he would ask me to go with him ... simply to be a help to the alto, for them to follow me. And so, it's just been you know something I've always done.

Seventeen year-old Emily Cornett described the role of the singing school as integral to her own musical education: "I learned the shape notes first when I was about seven years old when we had a singing school at our church ... so I learned them pretty good there."

In addition to the singing schools at the church, some of the young people in the congregation attend a two-week shape-note camp in the summer, the Tri-Cities Music Camp held in Kingsport, Tennessee.<sup>164</sup> The camp, having recently celebrated its ten year anniversary, serves regional young people and their families, who gather to learn and hone their musicianship within a worship-focused environment. Classes offered include sight-reading, all levels of music theory, parts singing, directing or conducting, as well as private instruction in piano and voice. In addition to the various classes, the school comes together for a devotional in the morning and for several group singing sessions throughout the day. The camp also eats all three meals together family-style, which the mothers and grandmothers of the children in attendance prepare. Emily Cornett described the impact of this camp on her own musical abilities: "Well, I would say, a lot of it [learning] was the shape note music camp that we went to in Kingsport ... we started there about three years ago and I just kept on learning and I've been learning a lot more of how it builds."<sup>165</sup>

The strong emphasis on teaching throughout the church's history has led to a strong singing tradition, which is highlighted in Mountain Dale's church minutes. Describing all

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<sup>164</sup> I had the opportunity to visit the camp for one day in the summer of 2009 and attended the morning devotional, several classes and group singings. During lunch, I met and spoke with the lead teachers at the camp, including Marty Phillips, owner of the Jeffress/Phillips seven-shape gospel publishing company.

<sup>165</sup> Emily Cornett, interview with author.

services held at the church since its constitution in 1943, each entry begins with the same phrase: “Services opened by singing.”<sup>166</sup> While not as descriptive as some of the minutes at Mount Lebanon, the commitment to open each service in song demonstrates the intrinsic connection between worship and song and between Mountain Dale and music. Mountain Dale’s minutes also mentioned visiting choirs, such as Brother Critcher’s visit with his youth choir from Spruce Pine on February 26, 1972,<sup>167</sup> recalling the enduring practice of sending and receiving musical delegates to assist in worship. This practice persists at Mountain Dale, where I witnessed the youth choir travel to sing at neighboring Green Valley Baptist Church during a revival in the fall of 2009 and to Watauga Baptist Church in the spring of 2010.

Under the leadership of various generations of Cornetts, the shape-note tradition at Mountain Dale flourished, producing numerous quartets that traveled to different churches to support them in revivals and in worship. Clint Cornett recalled the quartet he sang in with his family:

Yeah, me and Dad and my brother Blaine, and my sister, Merle [sang in a quartet]. She was eleven years old when she started singing alto in our quartet. And Ruth’s niece, Linda, she played the piano, at eleven. And Merle, my sister, could play the piano or sing alto and so could Linda. We were down in Tennessee one time, down in Erwin, Tennessee, in a church. We were in Erwin, Tennessee, singing one—I don’t know how come we was down there, we got invited by the preacher—I don’t know whether he heard us somewhere. Anyway, we were down there and they liked to sung our heads off, I mean we sang and they’d shout and we’d sing and they’d shout. Linda got tired of playing so she got up and Merle said she’d play a while and up they got. And they thought that was so wonderful—and it was, really, at eleven years old.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Mountain Dale Baptist Church Minutes (1943 – Present), Mountain Dale Baptist Church, Vilas, North Carolina.

<sup>167</sup> Mountain Dale Baptist Church Minutes (1969-1972), 02 February 1972, 34.

<sup>168</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

Kathy Deas also recalled her participation in a quartet, listing some of the very same members:

Then on into my young adult years, I sang with Preacher Clyde and Blaine and Leta and their daughter Pam and her husband Walter, in a quartet and we sang quite a bit. We got together at Blaine and Leta's home and they of course had a piano and we would just practice there and that was when Preacher Clyde was still pastoring a couple of churches and we would go to his churches and revivals and sing. Usually once a week, we would get together and practice and usually go somewhere Saturday night to sing.

While Mountain Dale no longer has an active quartet, it continues to participate actively in the seven-shape gospel tradition. Cornett enjoys writing poetry and typically composes and publishes at least one song in the various convention books used at the church: "I've got a song in each of those [convention books]. I really like that *Sing It Out* book, the middle one. 'Consider Him' is the title of the song—we love to sing it in the choir, but it's published and I've had several."<sup>169</sup> As such, it is not surprising that Cornett uses convention books regularly and focuses on new material:

But now those old songs that have been handed down, they're good! God help us never to lose out on those songs, but by the same token, God help us to never get hung up on them and not sing any new ones. Now that's what I've observed in this area—maybe people have got, maybe they have one hundred songs, maybe they have a lot of songs they sing, but they've been singing them for years, nothing new. And that's good, that's very good. But I've heard messages that really blessed my heart, I mean I could name you a dozen or two right now, but I wouldn't want to hear them every time I went to church. I wonder how the congregation feels about us as singers, if we sing the same songs, over and over and over. "Give us something!" You know, that's the reason God inspires people to write—and they're [new songs] not put in the old hymnals. I mean, those were printed back yonder and they're good. But to keep up, you've got to have the conventional books that have the new songs.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>170</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

At Mountain Dale, the seven-shape tradition is therefore defined by its church choir, by music as a form of worship, and by an emphasis on a changing repertoire that requires ongoing musical instruction.<sup>171</sup>

*Seven-Shape Gospel Music: A Regional Tradition*

A parallel review of the church histories and song directors reveals that the seven-shape gospel tradition persists at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale in slightly different fashions. At Mount Lebanon, Hayes works within a fixed repertoire of songs, emphasizing a personal preference for an older repertoire, while Cornett regularly introduces new songbooks, indicating his preference for a steady stream of new material. Thus, for Hayes, the seven-shape gospel tradition manifests itself in the materials themselves, printed in shape-note notation and composed in the gospel style. For Cornett, on the other hand, the tradition rests within the mechanism, with the seven-shape notation functioning as an important means to a specific musical end.

While both churches have unique histories that shape their current singing practices, their differences are tempered by extensive similarities. These similarities point to the pivotal role of the seven-shape tradition itself, thereby de-emphasizing the role of these specific churches and highlighting the need for an extensive review of the body of churches that sustain this singing practice. Over the course of my fieldwork, I visited several other independent missionary Baptist churches in Watauga County, all of which exhibited similar,

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<sup>171</sup> While it might appear that Mountain Dale has maintained stronger ties to an active and participatory seven-shape tradition, it is fifty years younger than Mount Lebanon, which must be considered in any comparison of the two churches. Clint Cornett, while of the same generation as Dale Hayes, is more analogous to Stewart Hayes, who led the choir at Mount Lebanon during the heyday of the seven-shape tradition. This comparison is more apt, given the similarities between the two leaders, one former and one present, both of whom composed in the seven-shape style and were actively involved in the teaching and dissemination of the tradition.



if not identical, worship and singing habits. Given these similarities, I distilled the seven-shape singing tradition into three defining characteristics: the large and informal church choir, the use of seven-shape gospel materials, and a pervasive attitude of worship that accompanies the singing. Since the seven-shape gospel tradition functions as an identifier of a specific religious group, in this case the independent missionary Baptists in Watauga County, it warrants further exploration on a regional scale. Thus, the comparative study of these two congregations and their singing traditions demonstrates the need to analyze key components of seven-shape gospel as central to the persistence of the tradition itself. These components serve not only as identifiers of the seven-shape gospel tradition, but also as proposed points of departure for future exploration of indigenous Appalachian religion practices.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Seven-Shape Gospel Music: Three Characteristics

On Sunday mornings, members gather at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist Churches in Watauga County to sing, pray, and worship together. Before the worship service, some congregants join together in prayer rooms, sharing prayer requests and praying for the upcoming service. Although the gathering is not officially part of the service, Mrs. Jan Moore described the role of the prayer room as an important opportunity to pray for many things. She specifically included the song service, thus articulating the critical intersection of music and worship:

I think you already know how I feel about the prayer room. If I may just put another note in there ... I do believe that the prayer room does have something to do with singing!! In the room we mention so many objects and burdens on each others' hearts. We pray for the service, singing, lessons, preaching. I believe if we start praying for our service before hand, the Lord will touch every part ... and that definitely means singing. Sometimes you will notice that the Spirit just isn't there, [and] I believe that is because praying has not been done.<sup>172</sup>

As the members leave the prayer rooms and enter the sanctuary, the church bell rings to signal the beginning of the service, which is opened by the church choir. This song service is led by the choir director and includes selections out of the *Church Hymnal*, seven-shape convention books, or binders of favorite shape-note convention songs. Sometimes, someone in the choir or a member of the congregation will ask to sing specific songs. The choir director always incorporates these requests into the song service, welcoming these requests as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The singing itself is four-part harmony, with

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<sup>172</sup> Jan Moore, email communication with author, 03 November 2009.

the voices separated onto different pews, referred to as the soprano-, alto-, tenor-, or bass-benches.

At the conclusion of the singing, the Sunday school superintendent welcomes the congregation and any visitors and leads the church in prayer. Before the congregation prays together, the superintendent asks for and hears the members' prayer requests, referred to as "objects" or "objects of prayer." The superintendent then calls on a member to lead the congregation in prayer.<sup>173</sup> Afterward, the superintendent reads the scripture for the Sunday school lesson and dismisses those in attendance into their separate classes. For thirty minutes, the congregation learns together in classes that are separated by gender or age or both. Some churches will use Sunday school materials, while others will draw the lessons solely from the Bible.<sup>174</sup> At the conclusion of Sunday school, a bell sounds and church members move back into the sanctuary for the preaching service.

The preaching service is opened by song. Once again, the choir sits together and sings out of one of its songbooks or hymnals. During or immediately following this singing, an offering is taken. At this time, a member or visitor might offer a special music selection, but typically this time is reserved for congregational singing during which the congregation

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<sup>173</sup> On Wednesday and many Sunday evenings, this prayer will take place at the church altar, with all who are able gathering to pray together at the front of the church. On Sunday mornings, the congregation remains in the pews.

<sup>174</sup> The decision to use Sunday school materials in addition to the Bible figures into the identity formation of many independent churches. Mount Lebanon's church minutes documented considerable tension in the congregation over the use of Sunday school materials and quarterlies in the 1930s. The committee elected to settle the dispute submitted the following report after several months of review: "We, your committee in the case in which brethren T. T. Danner, I. N. Minton, B. A. Hodges and others on one side and S. B. Hayes, Clyde Danners, and others on the other side; are pleased to submit that peace and satisfaction have been made and we further agree that a Bible class independent of literature be allowed. We further submit and entreat that the membership of the church be enlisted in the support and continuation of the general work of the church and that the use of our regular lessons of Sunday school literature be continued to the end, that harmony and prosperity may abound." Mount Lebanon Baptist Church Minutes (1891-1983), 01 February 1930, 117.

sings one or two songs together with the choir. At the end of the singing, the pastor preaches, opening his message in prayer. As the message concludes, the pastor will frequently ask for a song to accompany the altar call, encouraging the congregation to pray for those who might need to come forward. After the altar call, the pastor asks the congregation to share anything that might be on their hearts and this can result in a prolonged period of praise-giving and testimony. After the congregation has shared, the pastor will ask a member of the church to close the service in prayer.<sup>175</sup>

Within the structure of the independent Baptist service, music plays a pivotal role. While most independent missionary Baptist churches do not print a program or a bulletin, preferring instead to rely on the inspiration and leadership of the Holy Spirit, the order of service is almost identical each week: song service, Sunday school lesson, song service/congregational singing, and preaching service. The song service plays a fundamental role within the overall structure of worship and functions as an identifier of an independent Baptist congregation. In “The Phenomena of the Independent Baptist Movement,” Baptist preacher and author Dr. Harold Sightler described the singing traditions of the independent Baptists as lively, spiritual, and informal:

Our song service is informal, as are those in ninety-five percent of the independent Baptist churches. A few have robed choirs and anthems. But ninety-five percent of the independent Baptist churches have down-to-earth singing. That is a phenomenon.

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<sup>175</sup> While there are minor differences in worship style between the independent Baptist churches in Watauga County on Sunday and Wednesday evenings, my research has found the order of the Sunday morning service to be practically identical. This description is based on personal observation at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist Churches, as well as visits to different independent Baptist churches from January 2009 through spring of 2010. For more insight into the worship practices in independent Baptist churches in the rural South, see Howard Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987) and Jeff Titon, *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 210-212.

Numerous small country churches in the South still use the old shape note songbooks we grew up with that are friendly to the “old time religion.”<sup>176</sup>

The song service, defined by Sightler as the combination of an informal choir and the use of seven-shape gospel materials, is also characterized by a pronounced attitude of worship. The foundational role of worship within the singing tradition contributes to the quality of “old time religion,” which Sightler also identifies as a critical component of the independent Baptist song service.

In *Interaction Ritual Chains*, sociologist Randall Collins defines interactions by the combination of ritual ingredients and their corresponding outcomes. This model was instructive in my own research process, during which I identified the church choir, music materials, and worship as key ritual ingredients of the independent Baptist song service.<sup>177</sup>

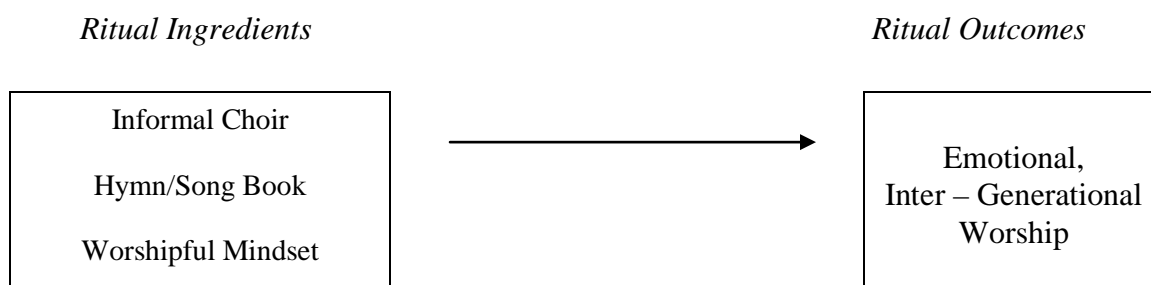


Figure 9. Interaction Ritual. The Seven-Shape Gospel Tradition at Mountain Dale and Mount Lebanon Baptist Churches. Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 48.

The collective result of these identifiers is an emotional and communal experience of worship through song. Worship is therefore both a key ingredient and an important outcome;

<sup>176</sup> Harold B. Sightler, “The Phenomena of the Independent Baptist Movement,” *The Church*, Revised edition (Greer, South Carolina: Sightler Publications, 2004), 157-175.

<sup>177</sup> Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 48.

the worship-centered approach to singing in turn creates a worshipful environment that is celebrated as traditional and old-fashioned, even though the seven-shape gospel tradition maintains a reputation as a modern phenomenon elsewhere.

*Seven-Shape Gospel Identifier: Informal Choir*

The first Sunday I attended Mount Lebanon Baptist Church in January 2009, I was looking forward to the music. Having already attended one of the county gospel singings, I had met a member from Mount Lebanon who had indicated that I could expect strong, four-part harmony singing. While that statement certainly proved to be true, I was surprised to find that most of the singing during the service was done by the choir. The first Sunday, I sat with the congregation and enjoyed the hymn singing, but was not sure whether or not to participate. The following Sunday, however, I sat on the alto bench during the song service and sang along, a practice I continued throughout the duration of my research at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale. As a result, it is challenging for me to address the difference in worship experience that must exist between the singers and non-singers. Regardless, the role of the choir itself was readily apparent from the onset of my participant observation and has become a focal point of interest that warrants further study.

While music plays a pivotal role in the song service, it is largely a function of the church choir. While a choir in name, the singers do not come together and practice on a weekly basis. Instead, the choirs that I have observed at the independent Baptist churches in Watauga County are comprised of a fluid group of singers. Members typically sing in the choir at each service, but they might also choose to sit out at any given time. Karen Jones, a member at Mount Lebanon Baptist, described this open and fluid nature of the choir: “It’s open to anybody that wants to sing. And I’m sure the choir leader would rather everybody

come than sit out.”<sup>178</sup> The choir has none of the external identifiers associated with its mainstream counterparts, such as a regular rehearsal schedule and robes, and is open to anyone interested in singing. In some churches, I have observed that the song service on Wednesday evening will function somewhat as a “rehearsal,” but it will still be held within the order of service. Emily Cornett described a typical Wednesday evening service at Mountain Dale, noting that it sometimes functions as an opportunity to work on new songs. “Sometimes we try new songs on Wednesdays, sometimes we just sing the old ones. It just depends on what he [choir director Clint Cornett] wants to do.”<sup>179</sup> At other churches, I have observed that a choir director might call for the occasional rehearsal to work on new songs, particularly around Christmas and Easter as the choir is preparing for special holiday services. Regardless of how the choir “rehearses,” it remains an informal body that relies on its collective musical capabilities to sing for, and occasionally with, the congregation.

While a portion of the service is set aside for congregational singing, it is significantly shorter than the song service and is eliminated in the case of special music. Mount Lebanon choir director Dale Hayes emphasized the importance of congregational singing as a way to discourage the evolution of church music into passive entertainment:

There’s lots of people that I think loves to sing a little, but you couldn’t hire them to come in the choir. And yet, it gives them the opportunity to participate. In fact, I’ve thought of it like this a lot of times, singing congregational songs gets people really involved in something, otherwise they just come there and sit there and say, “Entertain me!”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Karen Jones, interview with author.

<sup>179</sup> Emily Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>180</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

Pastor Wynn Greer agreed with Hayes's assessment, even as he admitted a preference for the choir's substantial role:

I would rather hear the choir sing, the ones that wanted to, than the others half-heartedly. I don't know, a lot of people think that they can't sing, so they're not confident in it, so they're sort of whispering through it. I wish they had more loud congregational singing, because where I stand, I can't ever hear anybody and I try to sing out, but I'm not the best singer in the world.<sup>181</sup>

Mountain Dale choir director Clint Cornett expressed enjoyment in congregational singing, but his description thereof nonetheless related back to the choir, thus accentuating the pivotal role of the choir within congregational song:

But we do have some congregational singing, yeah--I encourage that. I love congregational singing. I do, I love it. Do they participate, those that don't come in the choir? Well, they do the best they can, but you need to practice with the choir if you sing with the choir.<sup>182</sup>

In the 1931 Survey on Appalachian Religion, Jean Adams noted the choir's large role in a description of a rural service in Avery County:

The choir is composed of a large part of the dependable young people of the congregation, whose voices are strong rather than sweet. This group provides the music for the entire congregation, unless at the end of the service some very familiar piece is started ... The members of the choir are also the only ones who have song books.<sup>183</sup>

Similarly, in the 1959 Southern Appalachian Studies survey, David Graybeal described the performative function of the choir, taking note of the fluidity of the body of singers recruited out of the congregation:

The worshippers gathered at about the appointed hour and after a choir had been recruited, the service began with a discussion between Cox and the pastor as to who would name the tunes, each deferring to the other. The pastor was encouraged to call

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<sup>181</sup> Wynn Greer, interview with author.

<sup>182</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>183</sup> Adams, "Notes on Avery County," Appalachian Religion Survey Records.



them, and the service as recorded began. The choir stood for all hymns, but the people remained seated and only one or two joined in the singing. Hymnbooks were not distributed to the congregation, so it seemed that there was a general expectation that the choir would do the singing.<sup>184</sup>

Thus, the rural choir has historically fulfilled two roles, one choral and the other congregational. This duality is in part possible due to the large size of the choirs. Over the course of my research, I have observed choirs that comprised at least one third of the total congregation. Choir member Melissa Cornett of Mountain Dale Baptist acknowledged the large percentage of congregants who sing in the choir: “I’d say most of the people in the choir sing there pretty regularly. We all sit in that one section—I’d say a third, a fourth or a third of the church sings in the choir. Like on a Sunday morning, [if] there were ninety people, there’s at least thirty in the choir.”<sup>185</sup> These singers, who move seamlessly between choir and congregation, demonstrate the informality and fluidity of this critical segment of the total church population.

While scholarship has provided little insight into the extended role of the rural church choir in relation to the seven-shape gospel tradition, it appears to be a logical result of the evolution of gospel music towards its commercial, performance-based identity.<sup>186</sup> In the same way that the quartet eventually superseded congregational song at local and regional

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<sup>184</sup> Graybeal, “Grayson County Field Notes Week 2,” *Southern Appalachian Studies*.

<sup>185</sup> Melissa Cornett, interview with author, digital recording, 17 April 2009, Vilas, North Carolina.

<sup>186</sup> The first church choirs originated in the late seventeenth century in England as part of the “Regular Singing” movement, which introduced music notation or sol-fa syllables, an English variation of early shape note notation. “Regular Singing” was a response to the “Old Way of Singing,” or the lining out tradition that dominated pre-singing school hymnody in both Europe and the colonies. By the late seventeenth century, “Regular Singing” instruction took place in religious societies, functioning similarly to later singing schools. While the original intention of these societies was to improve congregational singing, over time they evolved into choirs whose more challenging repertoire was not accessible to the average congregant, setting a precedent for the eventual displacement of congregational singing by church choirs. Nicholas Temperley, “The Old Way of Singing: Its Origin and Development,” 19-22, *Rural Hymnody Symposium Publication Project*, Berea College Archives.

singing conventions, so too did choral singing eventually eclipse congregational song in rural churches. In William Montell's study of amateur gospel singing in Kentucky, a church member correlated the emergence of the gospel quartet with a decline in congregational singing, remarking, "I like good quartet singing, but usually the four best singers in a church are in a quartet. And when they go to going everywhere to sing and stop attending church, they've messed up the singing at home."<sup>187</sup> In the 1959 Southern Appalachian Studies Survey, 67 percent of the respondents agreed or agreed strongly with the following statement: "In church, I think it is better for everybody to join in singing hymns than to listen to the choir sing." The survey response represented a strong indictment of the decline in congregational singing. While I have neither heard dissenting comments nor observed contention about the expanded role of the church choir, it is nonetheless a significant departure from other church models that emphasize congregational singing. As a shape-note tradition, seven-shape gospel music is heir to a teaching tradition that was first introduced in order to encourage and sustain widespread congregational song. The tradition's persistence as a practice largely confined to a choir demonstrates that the shift towards the performative within the larger gospel genre has extended to the rural churches that sustain seven-shape gospel as an active singing tradition.

Another important dimension of the term choir is its dual definition as both a collection of singers and a physical location in the sanctuary. Many independent Baptist churches in the county have a uniquely positioned choir "loft" in their sanctuaries. Commonly referred to as the "choir," this area is located on either side of the pulpit at the front of the sanctuary, with the choir facing toward the preacher. Clint Cornett described the

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<sup>187</sup> Montell, *Singing the Glory Down*, 27.

unique layout of rural churches in Watauga County and the location of the choir: “The choir loft? Well, basically, through this whole country there’s every church has had a choir. ... We have a pretty good size choir and most everybody that sings comes into the choir, because we have room.”<sup>188</sup> Cornett’s comment demonstrates the confusion surrounding the term since it is not always clear whether he is referring to the location or the body of singers. In the 1931-1933 Survey on Appalachian Religion, Jean Adams described a slightly different layout, noting, “The front seats at the preacher’s left are occupied by the choir.”<sup>189</sup> However, in the 1959 Southern Appalachian Studies Survey, David Graybeal described the physical layout popular in Watauga County as the “traditional country church style, with two [pews] turned lengthwise on each side of the pulpit for the choir to use.”<sup>190</sup> As a style unique to country churches, both the layout of the “choir” and the body of singers that gather there function as important indicators of the rural seven-shape gospel tradition.

*Seven-Shape Gospel Identifier: Songbooks and Hymnals*

The song and hymn books at the independent Baptist churches in Watauga County are the strongest indicator of an enduring seven-shape tradition. A close analysis of popular worship materials illustrates the important role of shape-note publishing companies and the unique persistence of these materials in rural, independent congregations. Some churches in the county continue to use seven-shape convention books, which are published on a bi-annual basis and offer constant, new material to their church choir. In a 2009 interview, Charles Towler described the status of the seven-shape gospel publishing business:

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<sup>188</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>189</sup> Adams, “Notes Southern Mountains,” Appalachian Religion Survey Records.

<sup>190</sup> Graybeal, “Notes Grayson County, Week Two,” Southern Appalachian Studies.

And nowadays there are five publishers and every one of them, except one, is individually owned. It's just one person that owns that company and loves it so much that he keeps putting out a songbook every year and hopes he can at least break even.<sup>191</sup>

The relationship between an independent church and a contemporary seven-shape gospel publishing company is the most conclusive evidence of an active teaching tradition within a church as the ongoing introduction of new songs requires strong sight-reading and sight-singing skills. Mountain Dale Baptist, for example, has a longstanding relationship with Jeffress/Phillips Publishing, a contemporary seven-shape gospel publisher based out of Arkansas. Jeffress/Phillips books are widely sold in the tri-state area of eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, and southwest Virginia. Marty Phillips, owner and publisher of Jeffress/Phillips, attributes his sales in the Appalachian region to regional singing school instructors and camps that use his materials:

We met Mr. Clint Cornett and family at the Kingsport school 10 years ago. However, they had been using our books prior to that. Mr. W.C. Taylor, Jr. in Blountville, Tennessee (founder of the Tri-City school) introduced them to that area. He has introduced the books to many churches in the east Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia area. Many churches in the North Carolina area use our publications either regularly or for special music. Mostly this is due to Mr. Taylor and Mr. David Armistead (Carthage, Tennessee) along with many others, teaching singing schools in those areas.<sup>192</sup>

Conversely, many independent churches use old convention books, some from as early as the 1950s and 60s, and have not maintained ties with any of the remaining seven-shape publishers. As such, they choose to participate in a tradition to which they are only marginally connected. Towler indicated that, ironically, this group represents the largest faction within the rural gospel tradition today:

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<sup>191</sup> Towler, interview with author.

<sup>192</sup> Marty Phillips, email correspondence with author, 05 December 2009.

But, they don't even know what they're doing ... They wouldn't have any other kind of songbook, but then they don't even know why they're using it. I'd say, oh gracious, I'd say it's eighty to twenty [percent], maybe that way. 80 [percent] that don't know what they're doing to 20 [percent] that do. Overall, if you took the whole South—I can only compare the South—but I think if you took the whole South in most denominations ... your average Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal Church, I'd say maybe eighty percent of them don't even know why they're doing it and maybe fifteen or twenty percent know and actively do something about it.<sup>193</sup>

When Clint Cornett reviewed the list of Baptist churches in Watauga County, he used convention books as his benchmark to identify how entrenched a congregation was within the seven-shape gospel tradition. He distinguished between churches that order convention books regularly and those that continue to sing out of older editions, identifying the former with an active teaching practice and the latter with a more passive tradition.<sup>194</sup>

The *Church Hymnal*, more popularly known as the “red” or “red-back hymnal,” functions as another conclusive identifier of the seven-shape gospel tradition, or a remnant thereof. The use of this hymnbook persists across the spectrum of the seven-shape gospel tradition, both in congregations with an active teaching tradition and in those that have moved away from shape-note education. Published in 1951 by the Church of God Publishing Company out of Cleveland, Tennessee, the *Church Hymnal* was published as a compilation of popular gospel songs. Printed in hardback, it was able to compete with the denominational hymnals that emerged in the twentieth century while still functioning as a de facto convention book. Most independent Baptist churches in Watauga County sing out of the *Church Hymnal* and it was cited as the overwhelming favorite by most interview subjects when asked to name their preferred hymnal or songbook. According to their respective church minutes, the *Church Hymnal* was introduced at Mountain Dale in 1958 and at Mount

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<sup>193</sup> Towler, interview with author.

<sup>194</sup> Clint Cornett, conversation with author.

Lebanon in 1962. Charles Towler described how the hymnal might have traveled from Tennessee to Watauga County, indicating an informal word-of-mouth advertisement that quickly turned the book into both an “old favorite” and a “best seller”:

The only thing I know is that, when it came out in 1951, it took a few years for it to get established, but I think word just passed from one church to the other. You know, somebody would go visit another church and they’d say, “Man, I like this book. It’s got “So and So” in it. I love that song,” you know, “And it’s hard back!” So as far as how little churches in the mountains [got the *Church Hymnal*], I don’t know. It would have to be that somebody, some neighbor, somebody visiting someone saw it and it just passed on little by little. It had to have been, because I know ... they very seldom even had an advertisement for it. I can remember having some music catalogs that it would be in, but no, not in the general catalog. It just never has been publicized.<sup>195</sup>

Even without regular publicity, Towler indicated that the *Church Hymnal* remains a popular purchase for rural churches, “because it sells just about as many now, I’d say it might sell more now, than it did in the ‘50s. But it sells about as many now as it did when I came onboard in ’65.”<sup>196</sup>

Despite its overwhelming popularity,<sup>197</sup> the *Church Hymnal* has not been fully explored in academe. In 1979, Jeff Titon presented a paper at the Rural Hymnody Symposium hosted at Berea College on his research in an independent Baptist church in Stanley, Virginia, a congregation that sang out of the *Church Hymnal*. Ultimately published in Titon’s seminal work *Powerhouse for God* in 1988, the investigation still provided little insight into the role of the *Church Hymnal* itself, a lacuna that Titon had acknowledged as

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<sup>195</sup> Charles Towler, interview with author.

<sup>196</sup> Charles Towler, interview with author.

<sup>197</sup> The *Church Hymnal* now has its own Facebook group titled “Church of God—the old red-back book—Church Hymnal” with almost 2,500 members. Each day, moderator Bill Lloyd out of Illinois posts the lyrics to a hymn out of the book. [www.facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) search “Church Hymnal,” accessed 23 March 2010.

early as 1979.<sup>198</sup> In 2004, Donald LeRoy published a doctoral dissertation on the history and content of the *Church Hymnal*, providing insight into its publishing history and widespread popularity. Even so, he did not explore the possibility of the hymnal functioning as an identifier of the rural churches in which it is still prominently used.<sup>199</sup>

In addition to the *Church Hymnal*, some independent Baptist congregations also use *The Broadman Hymnal*, published by Broadman Press in 1940 and adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention. As an extension of the convention, the role of *The Broadman*, commonly referred to as “the green hymnal,” is contested within some independent churches. Baptist historian Charles Deweese addressed the important intersection of music and autonomy within Baptist worship, emphasizing independence as a basic tenet of the Baptist faith:

Powerful themes rivet through Baptist history. Examples include the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Bible, justification by faith, believer’s baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the believers’ church, worship and music, discipleship, evangelism, missions, stewardship, education, ethics, and cooperative relationships. Each theme adds significant meaning to the Baptist story. However, freedom functions as the central integrating theme of Baptist history. It supports and penetrates other Baptist doctrines, ideals, and practices.<sup>200</sup>

This independence directly impacted the music in unaffiliated Baptist churches whose suspicions of materials published by mainstream denominational presses resulted in stronger ties to the gospel songbooks printed by independent shape-note publishing companies.

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<sup>198</sup> Jeff Titon, “Hymnody at the Fellowship Independent Baptist Church, Stanley, Virginia,” Rural Hymnody Symposium Manuscript Project.

<sup>199</sup> LeRoy, “*Church Hymnal*.”

<sup>200</sup> Charles Deweese, *Freedom: The Key to the Baptist Genius* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2006), 5.

Mount Lebanon choir director Dale Hayes recalled this tension between denominational music and independent Baptists as related specifically to *The Broadman Hymnal*:

We had the original Baptist hymnal, the red one. See, the green one we got up here now, the *Broadman*, that was a controversial thing to a lot of people, when we brought it into the church. Simply because, see, we're not Southern Baptist, we're independent. In that old *Broadman* hymnal, if you'll notice, down at the bottom of the page on a lot of the songs, and they're good songs — [it] says [that the] song was approved by the SBA [Southern Baptist Association], and that was, to some people, they thought that was awful. I said, "Well, my goodness, if it's a good song, got good words, [it] doesn't matter what's written at the bottom of the page down there—sing it!"<sup>201</sup>

Regardless of the singing materials used in their specific congregations, all church members that I met identified strongly with their worship materials. Clint Cornett described the *Church Hymnal* and convention books as foundational to his religious identity, indicating that he would not welcome a change in materials: "I would be sad, because to me that's just as much a part of who we are, because they're not only just to make you feel good, but they're doctrinal, they teach and they have substance and meaning."<sup>202</sup> Dale Hayes echoed Cornett's sentiments, remarking, "Well, unless it's something that had some good songs and some of the old fashioned songs, I wouldn't want to go along with [change]."<sup>203</sup> Pastor Greer of Mount Lebanon Baptist Church also expressed a disinterest in changing materials, stating, "I would be sad, because to me, that's just as much a part of who we are."<sup>204</sup> As leaders in their church communities, the strong feelings that Hayes, Cornett, and Greer articulated about the direct correlation between worship materials and personal or corporate religious identity underscores the critical role of seven-shape gospel convention books and

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<sup>201</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

<sup>202</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>203</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

<sup>204</sup> Wynn Greer, interview with author.



hymnals to the persistence of the tradition itself and to its function as an identifier of rural, independent worship.

*Seven-Shape Gospel Identifier: Music as Worship*

The association between music<sup>205</sup> and worship quickly emerged as the dominant theme in each of my interviews. While those interviewed discussed their singing tradition, it was always in the context of worship and the song service was described as an important preparation for preaching. Melissa Cornett of Mountain Dale recalled the importance of music to her personal worship experience: “It would be strange to just go to church and just start right into preaching or Sunday school without any songs.”<sup>206</sup> Dale Hayes of Mount Lebanon described the role of singing as a prelude to the sermon, emphasizing the primacy of preaching:

I think it’s [music] very important, because if you’ve got good singing and you pick out some good songs to start with—like a Sunday morning service—I think it just gets the services started off right, if you’ve got good singing and the choir’s singing in the Spirit. If you get an old draggy [song], to me it just drags the whole service out. But if you got your service started off with good singing, I think it’s very instrumental in what goes on—not that you’re putting the emphasis on just singing. Lots of churches really put an emphasis on singing, more so than they do the teaching or preaching. ‘Cause the preaching’s the most important thing at the church, but I think the singing has a big bearing on it.<sup>207</sup>

Every interview subject stressed worship and praise as the most important component of their singing experience, and as a result, song texts were considered critical as vehicles of a specific message. Many church members articulated that music needs to be scripturally

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<sup>205</sup>When using the term music or singing in this section of the paper, I am referring to the seven-shape gospel tradition, except where noted. Since the music in the churches is strongly rooted in the seven-shape gospel tradition, the terms are synonymous.

<sup>206</sup> Melissa Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>207</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

based and rooted in the gospel. Hayes identified the difference between a good and a bad song by the ability to encourage someone in their faith and salvation. Hayes reasoned that “a lot of songs are real good scriptural, spiritual songs. And then you have some that’s off far field somewhere—there ain’t nothing in the world that would touch somebody’s heart for accepting the Lord as Savior.”<sup>208</sup>

Pastor Greer even related the song service to his experience in the pulpit, placing a high value on the importance of song to his message: “Well, it gets everything started either on a good note or a bad note, because if the singing is real good, it makes it real easy to preach.”<sup>209</sup> Because Greer relies on divine inspiration for his weekly messages, the importance of song is magnified as a tool through which God may choose to send inspiration. Given the important role of the song service as an important precursor to the preaching itself, I wondered whether Pastor Greer and choir director Hayes worked together to coordinate the music with the theme of the sermon. In response, Greer allowed, “He prays about it and I pray about it,” but both he and Hayes denied any formal coordination. However, they also acknowledged that it might appear that they worked closely together, because as Greer noted, “I would say ninety percent of the time, I could say, ‘That’s exactly what I’m preaching on,’ or I’ll say, ‘It’s like the song we sung this morning,’ but we’ve not communicated at all about it and never have.”<sup>210</sup> Hayes echoed Greer’s statements about the coordination between the song and preaching service:

No, I never question him [the preacher] on what he’s preaching on. And it’s amazing, a lot of times I’ll pick a song and he’ll get up there and say, “Well, that song we sang

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<sup>208</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

<sup>209</sup> Wynn Greer, interview with author.

<sup>210</sup> Wynn Greer, interview with author.

[a] while ago, that ties right in with what I was going to preach about.” And I didn’t have any idea. It’s just maybe the Holy Spirit led me that way.<sup>211</sup>

In addition to its prominent role in setting the stage for preaching, music also functions as a catalyst for personal spiritual contemplation and growth. Cornett related his connection to the shape-note tradition as intrinsically connected to his personal salvation. While working in Toledo, Ohio, in the early 1950s, Cornett and his wife returned home to Watauga County for Thanksgiving. At that time, Cornett was not, in his words, “living for the Lord,” and he described the moment that he recognized this in relationship to a seven-shape convention song entitled “The Rapture Day.” While recounting this story Cornett sang the first few lines of the song: “Oh, the rapture day, must be drawing night, let the saints look up toward the eastern sky. Distress will reign on earth, heaven will ring with mirth.” Cornett credited the song, both the text and the music, which he characterized as having “a lot of after time,” to his initial interest in both personal salvation and shape-note music:

And that [song] rang in my head and still does. And that was a long time ago, but it’s still there, never been erased. And that built a fire under me and we went back to Toledo and I ordered a book, a little rudiment book ... It was James D. Vaughan’s book, probably a ’54 or ’55 ... but that was the name of that song “The Rapture Day.”

And I got the rudiment book anyway and I begin to study that thing. But, what I’m trying to get to is the fact that when we came back home, the music was just laid over, kind of in my lap, and I accepted it gladly, because I love music and I’d been—you know, that song’s still ringing.<sup>212</sup>

Wynn Greer related a similar story to the congregation at Mount Lebanon during a sermon he preached on the importance of a traditional lifestyle. While the sermon had a

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<sup>211</sup> Dale Hayes, interview with author.

<sup>212</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

broadier focus, significant here is the memory Greer shared about the role of “an old-time hymn” in a personal conversion experience while on military duty in England:

You know, there’s power in this book this morning. There’s power in these songs that we sing. I’ll never forget, I was in the military and I was over in England in the Air Force and I was at that time, not living my life for God. I wasn’t where I should have been. We were going to church, but it was just ... sort of living on the fence, on the wrong side ... I remember, we were there in the warehouse one day and it was Friday and it was the end of the day and we were sweeping out the warehouse—had to do it all the time. And there was another boy there from Tennessee and I liked him and his name was Jim. And we got along good, ‘cause we could understand each other ... And Jim was sort of raised like I was raised and Jim was over there and he was a ‘sweepin’ and he was a ‘whistlin’ an old-time hymn, just humming along. And I don’t remember now exactly which one it was, but I’ll tell you what. As he was sweeping the floor, and he wasn’t paying no attention—probably didn’t even know, just out of habit, just like I done many times, and you’ve done many times. I’ll never forget, the Holy Ghost of God came into that warehouse. Boy, he got a hold of me, and I could hear my grandmother in church, and the choir, singing them old songs, and boy, God got a hold of my heart. Oh I’m glad for the Holy Spirit this morning ... the Holy Ghost of God come into that warehouse and he convicted me.<sup>213</sup>

The Holy Spirit played a pivotal and recurring role in descriptions of the song service. Church members often related the work of the Holy Spirit to the singing itself, and I have personally observed that the song service would often be extended into a prolonged period of personal testimony and praise-giving, all of which would be attributed to a higher power. Clint Cornett described the role of music as an important vehicle within which the Holy Spirit works in both the choir and the remainder of the congregation, listing the “old songs” from the “red hymnal” as catalysts for an emotional worship experience:

Well, two weeks ago, we got started singing, we sung a couple of songs, and then, four or five songs sung us. You understand? There’s a difference in me singing a song and a song singing me—I mean it’s as different as daylight and dark. And that’s when the Lord gets the praise in it. But, couple of weeks ago, we was singing old songs that morning, just some old standards out of the red hymnal, out of our own book that we made up, we were singing out of that. And, I don’t know, the Spirit of

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<sup>213</sup> Wynn Greer, Sermon, Mount Lebanon Baptist Church, digital recording, 26 July 2009, Vilas, North Carolina.

the Lord just seemed to come in and stay awhile and people got to testifying how good the Lord had been to them and is to us.<sup>214</sup>

Church members often framed the presence of the Holy Spirit as a wonderful but indefinable occasion in worship, most typically relating the divine arrival to an emotional song service. During the course of my research, I experienced the emotion of both the singing and preaching service during which an uplifted hand or a shout might indicate a personal feeling of the Spirit.

In addition to emphasizing the centrality of the Holy Spirit and its blessing to the song service, music was described to me as a scriptural imperative. Within a fundamentalist church that relies on a literal interpretation of the King James Version of the Bible, the word of scripture is law. It is not surprising therefore that discourse about worship through song led almost predictably back to scripture. Clint Cornett emphasized the scriptural basis for singing, quoting Ephesians 5:19:

The scripture says, “Speaking to yourselves in psalms, in hymns and spiritual songs.” When we do that, then God’s going to be praised and somebody’s going to be blessed and that’s what it’s about, worshiping Him. So, that’s where it’s [music] so used, is in worship.<sup>215</sup>

Preacher Wynn Greer also pointed out the scriptural imperative for singing in church, remarking, “I think, just like anything, I think it’s scriptural—that’s the main reason. God gave it to us, for that reason, to help us to worship, so yeah, it’s vital.”<sup>216</sup>

The most significant connection between the scriptural command to worship in song and the seven-shape gospel tradition in particular emerged very late in my field work. On a

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<sup>214</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>215</sup> Clint Cornett, interview with author.

<sup>216</sup> Wynn Greer, interview with author.

visit in February of 2010, during which I was reviewing my findings with Clint Cornett, he mentioned the first singing school recorded in the Bible. While I had heard sermons preached on the importance of traditional music, largely defined by gospel songs and old hymns, I had not encountered this scripture. Cornett quickly turned to 1 Chronicles 25 and related the story of the musicians in King David's army, whose music lessons are easily overlooked in a chapter consisting otherwise of extensive genealogy. 1 Chronicles 25: 1, 6-7 underscores both the role of musicians and the importance of those "that were instructed in the songs of the Lord":

1 Moreover David and the captains of the host separated to the service of the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals: and the number of the workmen according to their service was ... 6 All these [were] under the hands of their father for song [in] the house of the LORD, with cymbals, psalteries, and harps, for the service of the house of God, according to the king's order to Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman. 7 So the number of them, with their brethren that were instructed in the songs of the LORD, [even] all that were cunning, was two hundred fourscore and eight.

Referred to as the "first singing-school," this scripture sheds insight into the entrenched nature of the seven-shape gospel tradition within these churches. More familiar references to music in the Bible include pastoral images of David playing on his harp and the angel chorus. However, in these rural independent Baptist churches, it is the image of a singing school that resonates most strongly with the congregation, indicating a powerful and lasting connection to the seven-shape gospel tradition and its singing school heritage.

### *Three Identifiers: One Tradition*

The three identifiers, or ritual ingredients, emerged prominently throughout my research as critical to the seven-shape singing tradition as it persists in independent Baptist churches in Watauga County today. While derived primarily from observations at Mount

Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist Churches, these traits are equally prominent in other independent churches in the region, prompting my investigation of them not as unique to a specific congregation, but rather as integral to a widespread tradition. All three characteristics, the seven-shape materials, the large and informal church choir, and the foundational attitude of worship, are presented here as important components of rural seven-shape gospel music, a hybrid genre that synthesizes old and new into an enduring singing tradition.

## Conclusion

### “Farther Along, We’ll Know All About It”

As a genre of music and a singing style that blends old and new together, the seven-shape gospel tradition has long been both misunderstood and under-represented in academic scholarship. From its origins in the late nineteenth century urban revival movement, where it quickly became a dominant force in the emerging music market, to its persistence as a rural shape-note tradition, seven-shape gospel music has contributed significantly to the canon of American hymnody. Nonetheless, it has been obscured through a myriad of academic lenses, many of which have focused on earlier and marginalized forms of American sacred music. This was perhaps most pronounced in the Appalachian region where an enduring emphasis on the oldest and most unusual religious traditions and singing practices persists to this day.

While the seven-shape gospel tradition declined as a popular singing practice in the latter part of the twentieth century, it is now experiencing a revival of its own. Within the past thirty years, shape-note summer camps have emerged across the rural South, teaching the next generation of gospel singers how to read and sing by shape. Interviews with contemporary seven-shape gospel publishers all indicated a pronounced optimism based on an upsurge in requests for singing schools as well as increased sales. Clint Cornett described the status of the seven-shape gospel tradition in Watauga County as having retained “the same spirit, just fewer participants.”<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Clint Cornett, conversation with author.



Watauga County presents a compelling case study of the seven-shape gospel tradition. Located within the Appalachian region, its churches and their singing traditions have been filtered through the lens of Appalachian religion historiography, which has traditionally favored the most visible and audibly unique worship practices to document and highlight. As such, the practices and singing traditions of the marginalized Old Baptist sects, such as the Primitive and Old Regulars, have overshadowed the contributions of more representative groups, such as the independent missionary Baptists, who constitute the remnant of the seven-shape gospel singing tradition in Watauga County. As a tradition and practice, seven-shape gospel music was first disregarded by folk revivalists and later by religious historians, two groups that have historically been more invested in the archaic images and sounds of the region. Thus, in Appalachia, the seven-shape gospel tradition persists despite a two-fold prejudice that discredits it as both popular and modern.

In 2008, the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University hosted “Farther Along: A Conference on the Southern Gospel Convention Singing Tradition,” the first academic gathering devoted to seven-shape gospel music and its persistence in the rural South. The program organizers recognized the tradition as a popular style of singing within many rural churches across the South and sought to rectify its enduring misrepresentation in the academic arena. This conference was the first vital step towards addressing the complex history and persistence of a most popular sacred singing tradition. The title of the conference, “Farther Along,” references the famous gospel song by the same name, published by the Gospel Trumpet Company in *Select Hymns for Christian Worship* in 1911. The text of the chorus describes the oft overlooked journey of the seven-shape gospel tradition itself.

Farther along we'll know all about it,  
 Farther along we'll understand why;  
 Cheer up my brother, live in the sunshine,  
 We'll understand it all by and by.<sup>218</sup>

As academics reconsider the current paradigm that frames both the fields of sacred music and Appalachian religion scholarship and move towards a more comprehensive understanding of the seven-shape gospel tradition, their path will undoubtedly intersect with the rural independent Baptist church. As a body of loosely associated, but unaffiliated congregations, rural independent sister churches have both sustained this singing tradition and eluded extensive academic inquiry. Any full-scale investigation of the rural seven-shape tradition should therefore encompass a closer investigation of the rural churches and denominations that continue to serve as its strongest allies and most active participants.

Within the tri-state area of western North Carolina, east Tennessee, and southwest Virginia, the tradition that figures most prominently into the history of the seven-shape gospel tradition is the independent missionary Baptist church. While scant academic literature exists on this particular sect, it constitutes the largest body of traditional churches in the region with worship practices strongly rooted in the seven-shape gospel tradition. While this study was based predominantly on observations and interviews conducted at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist Churches of Vilas, North Carolina, the similarities in worship and singing styles between these two congregations and their sister churches is striking. An order of worship that prominently features a song service, the use of seven-shape gospel materials, a large and informal church choir, and a profound attitude of worship all define the worship experience at independent missionary Baptist churches in the region.

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<sup>218</sup> Text and tune to “Farther Along” are attributed to W.B. Stevens and are now in the public domain.

These three characteristics overlap with dualities that emerged throughout my review of rural worship practices. The distinction between participatory and performative traditions, old and new music styles, and formal versus informal worship all contribute to an understanding of the role of the church choir, the use of seven-shape gospel materials, as well as the worship-oriented approach to singing. It is the intersection of these dualities and the defining characteristics of seven-shape gospel that addresses the complexity of rural singing traditions and their role within regional religious identity.

As the review of Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale's singing traditions documents, seven-shape gospel persists as a vital component of worship in both churches. At Mount Lebanon, the singing tradition is characterized by a stable repertoire of gospel songs and hymns. At Mountain Dale, on the other hand, the seven-shape tradition manifests itself more prominently in the teaching heritage of shape notes, resulting in an emphasis on new songs. The distinction between these two interpretations of the shape-note tradition mirrors the division between churches that continue to teach shape-note theory and those that sing the music without an understanding of the notation style. Charles Towler intimated that the vast majority of seven-shape churches fall into the latter category, raising important questions about the long-term viability of this tradition. However, the strong commitment to the gospel singing style in both churches, regardless of the teaching component, bodes well for the persistence of the tradition in the near future.

The seven-shape gospel tradition in Watauga County provides insight into the evolution and persistence of sacred music traditions in a close-knit rural community. This evolution has necessarily been impacted by its Appalachian context and the challenges of presenting and representing the region in scholarship. Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale

Baptist Churches serve thus as important representatives for both the seven-shape gospel tradition and the rural independent missionary Baptist church, two critical identifiers of Appalachian religion that have previously been excluded from scholarship. The seven-shape singing tradition challenges previous models of academic scholarship and creates a new framework within which to envision traditional Appalachian religious expression and experience, necessarily shifting a dated paradigm to accommodate the vibrant contributions of rural independent Baptists and their sacred song.

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Over the course of my field work, I attended regular services, Sunday school, monthly gospel singings, vacation Bible school, revivals, and a singing school at various independent Baptist churches in Watauga County, focusing primarily on the following two congregations:

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Mountain Dale Baptist Church, Vilas, NC: 01/15/09 – Present

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Meredith Doster was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on March 8, 1981, into a musical family with roots in the shape-note community of rural northeast Arkansas. At ten years of age, Doster moved to Germany with her family and graduated from the John F. Kennedy Schule in Berlin in 1999. Doster attended Barnard College at Columbia University from 1999-2003, graduating with a bachelor's degree in music. After graduation, Doster spent a formative nine-month term as an AmeriCorps volunteer before committing to full-time social work for four years, working with youth in rural western Massachusetts.

Doster matriculated at Appalachian State University in 2008 as a student in the master's program in Appalachian Studies and focused her studies on the seven-shape gospel singing tradition in Watauga County, North Carolina. As a fourth generation shape-note singer, Doster combined her personal interest and family heritage with her love for archival research, writing a thesis on the evolution of sacred song in western North Carolina. Doster plans to continue her studies of sacred music in a doctoral program.